Riikka Uuksulainen

# MOTHERING RITUALS:
# A STUDY ON LOW CASTE WOMEN IN KOLKATA

Academic dissertation to be publicly discussed, by due permission of the Faculty of Theology at the University of Helsinki in lecture hall 6, on 26 June 2013, at 12 o'clock noon.

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## Abstract

This study explores how the ideals of motherhood and the obligation to procreate are displayed and dealt with in the ritual practices of low caste women in India. The study identifies and classifies religious rituals and practices of mothering that women adhere to, and deciphers the meanings and motives underlying their ritual conduct. The mothers' rituals are approached from the viewpoint of reciprocity, the exchange of gifts that takes place between the devotee and the deity in the ritual context.

The main research questions are: What are the functions and meanings of gift-giving and gift exchange in low caste mothers' rituals? and how do these women's ritual activities influence their self concept and social status? The study presents two key arguments: First, it assumes that a gift offered is not a mere gift, but involves a deal. Thus, by offering gifts to deities the mothers make deals for a better life for their children and husband. The second argument challenges the idea of low caste women as truly low.

The primary source for this study is the data collected among low caste communities in the state of West Bengal during three distinct fieldwork periods between 2002 and 2008. In the research fields, the common methods of ethnographic recording, participant observation and interviews were applied. The research data consist of fieldwork notes and interviews of thirty-two mothers, all members of the three low caste neighbourhoods of the metropolitan area of Kolkata.

The study uses and develops the concept of the mothering ritual as a dominant category under which the mothers' rituals are grouped. The mothering ritual is understood in a broad sense, covering a wide spectrum of religious practices related to motherhood. The main types of mothering rituals comprises the prenatal situation; the rituals performed to improve fertility; the birth and postnatal rites; and the various practices by which women seek protection and cures for their maturing children. A chronological definition, based on the different phases of motherhood, serves as a signpost to the analysis.

The understanding of gift-giving is inspired by the gift theory of Marcel Mauss and his successors. It is shown that the idea of reciprocity and gift exchange – especially giving promises and vows in exchange for rewards – appear as the very essence of the informants' ritual behaviour, to the extent that their ritual conduct can be conceptualized in terms of business making.

Even though the women's rituals conformed to the conventions of the patriarchal discourse, performing rituals was not only a social obligation, but also a personally empowering experience for most women interviewed. Women, of their own accord, sought assistance and a chance for a supernatural encounter in diverse circumstances. By performing rituals women won the respect of their community, but also articulated their unspoken feelings and experiences and gained confidence in themselves.



*Keywords*: low caste women, mothering ritual, reciprocity, gift exchange, Kolkata

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All photos, including cover photo, have been taken by the author, in the research sites in Kolkata in 2003–08.

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food, I greatly benefited from the education and knowledge of Professor Sen. His ideas and views were of excellent value. For practical support I am thankful to the Women Studies Research Centre at the University of Kolkata. Professor Ishwita Mukherjee provided me with useful insights about the community construction of Kolkata and helped me in constructing the list of questions. I would especially like to thank the Centre staff for helping me in carrying out the interviews at field sites. I owe special thanks to my interpreter, research fellow Mou Bhattacharya for sharing the pains of travelling around Kolkata for interviews, and to research assistant Kalpana Sen for doing hard work in transcribing the interviews.

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While running fieldwork among low caste women it never crossed my mind that one day I would be parenting a child with a similar background. In 2009 we got a wonderful, miraculous gift, two-and-a-half-year-old Shankar, born of South Indian mother. Right before the public defense of this doctoral thesis we were gifted with another child, Jiani, born of Chinese mother. I dedicate this work to the mothers of my two children, who did not have the

chance to see their children grow. By this work I want to thank them for entrusting me with the most precious gifts possible.

Every doctoral student should have a husband like my Tommi. His genuine enthusiasm, constant encouragement and unshaken confidence in me made all this possible. Even if it was in middle of the night he was ready to revise and comment my ideas and text. There are no words to thank him, my true companion and love.

Vaasa, 1 May 2013
Riikka Uuksulainen

# PART I: INTRODUCTION

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Prologue: a feast for the benefit of children

A group of women were crowding into the platform of a lorry at one of the narrow alleys of the Janbazar quarter, which is located in the very heart of Kolkata city centre. I was invited to join the women celebrating Chhaṭḥa pūjā, one of their main annual feasts. They were about to start the drive to the banks of the Hoogley River, where one of the main rituals of Chhaṭḥa pūjā was staged at nightfall.[1] These mothers, some of them just teenagers, were sitting down quietly as many of them were physically weakened by the rigorous fasting. They had also finished the task of preparing all the plentiful food offerings (*bhoga*) required for conducting the rituals. Along with the women, a variety of sweetmeats, clusters of bananas, flowers, and all the ritual ware were on their way to the river. The women were dressed, as is appropriate for the feast, in colourful saris, which indicated their status: They were spouses of living husbands and mothers with children – as respectable women of their age ought to be.

The atmosphere in the lorry was like the final straight of a long run. After the hard work and self-discipline, the women were soon going to attain their goal. Some women were convinced that their abstinence bestowed them with great powers. During the lorry ride, they joined in chanting hymns in the name of their favourite deities. The riverside was already bustling with people as the lorry arrived, and husbands received their wives there. In consequence of their careful preparation women were considered chaste and pure enough to perform the rituals of Chhaṭḥa pūjā, and to give the food offerings for the Sun deity: Only the right conduct was supposed to bring about the desired results. Adhering to all the ritual codes of Chhaṭḥa pūjā was a demanding exercise, but the observance was believed to be equally rewarding. Conducting Chhaṭḥa pūjā, as the women reasoned it, generated well-being and success for their children.

## 1.2 In search of voice: defining the research task

The starting point for this study is to listen to and learn from a group of Indian women who are commonly labelled as impure, untouchable, oppressed, underprivileged: the poorest of the poor in the Indian society. In striving for this goal I wish to escape the generalizations that Western feminists are often accused of. To do so requires paying attention to the critique of Chandra Mohanty and others bothered by authors who construct “third world women as a homogenous, pow-

[1] This description of celebrating Chhaṭḥa pūjā was recorded in the fieldwork dairy on 28-29 October and 31 December of 2003, and it was documented with photographs. The main interpretation of the feast was given by Unni, one of my interviewees, who conducted the rituals along with other women. Chhaṭḥa pūjā is one of the major religious feasts, especially of Bihari women.

erless group often located as implicit victims of particular socioeconomic systems" (Mohanty 1991, 57).[2] To avoid this, I will investigate what lies at the bottom of these depressing attributes and how the women themselves portray their lives and construct their identities. By engaging in this research process I want to mediate the voices of these women as they interpret and describe their position, particularly within their religious and ritual cosmos.[3] The analogy of voice – 'use of voice' and 'voices of dissent' – has been employed also in political rhetoric, particularly in the debates on equality/inequality, human rights, and democracy in India. According to Nobelist Amartya Sen, "the demand[s] of justice in India are also demands for more use of voice in the pursuit of equity" (Sen 2005, 38).[4]

In so far as the life of a Hindu woman in India is approached in the context of a 'married woman's duty' (*strīdharma*) as recorded in the Hindu law books, it is obvious that her most fundamental obligation is to continue the family line of her husband. Accordingly, the sense of being a woman is traditionally more or less equated with being a mother (of preferably a son). This primary value of the ideal Hindu woman has also been articulated through her ritual duty. The purpose underlying most (married) women's rituals (*strī ācāras*) is the safe procreation of children and the well-being of one's husband.

This study explores how the ideals of motherhood and the fundamental obligation of procreation are displayed and dealt with in the ritual practices of women. The goal thereby is to identify and classify religious rituals and practices of mothering that women adhere to, and to decipher the meanings and motives underlying their ritual conduct. Mothers' rituals are approached from the viewpoint of reciprocity, the exchange of gifts that takes place in the ritual context. The aim is to explore gift-giving practices and various aspects of the reciprocity between devotee and deity.

The main research questions of this study are: What are the functions and meanings of gift-giving and gift exchange in low caste mothers' rituals? and how do these women's ritual activities influence their self concept and social status?

The study presents two key arguments that are directly related to the research questions above. First, it assumes that a gift offered is not a mere gift, but involves a deal. Thus, mothers by offering gifts to deities make deals for a better life for their children and husband. Marcel Mauss and his numerous successors in discussing gift have suggested that even if the selfless gift exists, most gifts are motivated by self-interest: People give gifts out of obligation, and in hope of reciprocity, expecting to receive something in return.[5] Similarly, I assume that gift-giving that occurs

[2] See also Mohanty 2006, 17–42. The same concern has been expressed also by Gloria Goodwin Raheja 2003b, 5.

[3] This challenge was articulated by Julia Leslie in the early 1990s. She argued that "in the context of the religious experiences of women, the current challenge means not only seeking out the voices of women but also hearing their own evaluations" (Leslie 1992, 3). In 2007, Tracy Pintchman noted that Leslie's challenge had, to a certain extent, been met by those scholars who had taken the task to find out "what Hindu women themselves said and did within the context of their own religious values and convictions" (Pintchman 2007, 7).

[4] The very challenge has been put forward also by R.S. Khare (1998, 174).

[5] This idea is one of the main theses of sociologist Marcel Mauss 1990 (1923–1924).

in the ritual context involves or entails in most cases a wish for reciprocity. Previous ethnographic studies have assessed reciprocity in the ritual context in the light of the sociological meanings of gift exchange. Those studies usually concern the sharing of material gifts among the human participants of the ritual.[6] In this study the 'intentional' parties participating in the exchange of gifts are the devotee and deity, mother and god/dess favoured. Ritual is thus viewed as a setting for the presumed exchange of gifts between the human and divine subject.[7] The exchange of gifts, therefore, is based on what women suppose or believe it to be. The return gifts are indeed what the devotees believe they receive from the deity as a return on their investments.

The second argument challenges the idea of low caste women as truly low.[8] Michael Allen asserts that "the position of women vis-à-vis men, both in terms of status and autonomy, improves the lower one descends the social hierarchy" (Allen 1990, 16). I suggest that one of the main factors that contribute to the higher regard of a low caste woman is that she regularly adheres to the ritual duties and is thus thought to keep her family in good favour with the divinities. In fulfilling this religious obligation she gains authority and wins the respect of her kin and community.

### 1.3 Introductory remarks on the research data, sources, and method

The primary source for this study are the data collected among low caste communities in the state of West Bengal during three distinct fieldwork periods between 2002 and 2008. In the research fields, I applied the common methods of ethnographic recording, participant observation and interviews. The research data consist of fieldwork notes and interviews of thirty-two mothers, all members of the three low caste neighbourhoods of the metropolitan area of Kolkata. I will describe the research process and introduce the low caste communities and the interviewed women in detail in Chapters 3 and 4.

In carrying out ritual practices the informants relied completely on oral tradition. Details about the various practices of ritual conduct had been transmitted to them usually by the elders of their family, by other members of their community, or by people living in the proximity of their neighbourhoods. Although my emphasis is on the oral tradition, the written records of the rituals provide an important tool for analysing the living ritual practices, for example, by helping to understand how illiterate women interpret and mould the rituals to correspond to their views and

[6] See, for example, Fruzzetti 1990; Parry 1986, 1989; Raheja 1988.

[7] A similar perception has been put forward for example by Gupta 1997, 92–93 and Pearson 1996, 3.

[8] The questions of who belongs to the low caste in the Indian context and on what condition is far from apparent. The low caste, as commonly defined, refers to those groups of people who are considered either the lowest sub-castes (*jāti*) of the servant caste Śūdras, or those left outside the caste framework. They have been referred to as untouchables, Dalits, Scheduled castes, and a number of other names depending on the context. What is common to most of these groups is that they are engaged in menial tasks that other people avoid and consider polluting. Most of them deal with human and animal waste.

needs. A detailed exploration of the textual background of the each ritual is, however, beyond the scope of this study.

The most useful written records include contemporary ritual guidebooks and tracts on the conduct and stories of women's rituals. Some tracts introduce one rite in particular, while some booklets – usually called *Ritual Conduct of Women* (*Meyedera Bratapārban*) or *Ritual Stories of Women* (*Meyedera Bratakathā*) – have collections of varied rituals. These booklets and tracts, on sale at small book stalls in front of the main temple entrances, contain the information women require to justify the performance of the rites and conduct them in a precise manner. Other equally useful written records are the local astrological calendar (*pañjikā*) and previous ethnographic studies from nearby areas that introduce and list various rituals, their purposes, and timings.[9]

## 1.4 Reflections on the niche

Within the discipline of comparative religion, this thesis can be positioned as regards its method and substance at least in the following fields of study: ethnographic and ritual studies, studies on South Asian religions and contemporary popular religious traditions, and studies on women and religion. My research has been guided by other disciplines as well, particularly cultural and social anthropology and women's studies. In what follows, I will discuss the niche of this research in the context of those connecting fields of study. I will also situate this work within a wider academic context and assess its possible scholarly and societal contributions.

### Ethnographic study

In studying contemporary oral tradition it is generally agreed that the most efficient and reliable methodological approach is that of ethnography. As regards the Finnish context, several scholars of comparative religion have participated in developing the ethnographic paradigm and paved ways for the production of reliable ethnographic interpretations.[10]

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[9] To name but a few most essential writings that provide lists of rituals in and around the Bengal region are the classical work of *Bāṃlār Brata* by Abanindranath Tagore (1919); *Folk Ritual of Eastern India* (1988) and *Human Fertility Cults and Rituals of Bengal* (1989) by Prayot Kumar Maity; *Women's Brata Rituals* by Sila Basak (2006); and *Making Virtuous Daughters and Wives: An Introduction to Women's Brata Rituals in Bengali Folk Religion* by June McDaniel (2003). For mapping the domestic ritual conduct in Hindu scriptures, the grant work of *The History of Dharmaśāstra* (1968–1977) by P.V. Kane is an outstanding source. In terms of the immediate past, one relevant source on ritual practices of Brahmans is Sinclair Stevenson's (1920) *The Rites of the Twice-Born*. On *saṃskāras,* the Hindu rites of passage in general, the works of Mary McGee (2004), Rajbali Pandey (1994) and Musashi Tachikawa, Shoun Hino and Lalita Deodhar (2001) are of great value.

[10] Juha Pentikäinen's extensive academic work on Nordic cultures is based for the most part on ethnographic recording. Pentikäinen has had a major influence in developing the paradigm of Northern ethnography. René Gothóni while carrying out a long-lasting field experiment of the pilgrimage to Mount Athos has advanced ethnographic methods with reference to the understanding and interpreting of the Other. Tuula Sakaranaho, in her studies on women and Islam, has contributed to the ethnographic scope of Finnish comparative religion by contriving a method of rhetorical analysis. The varied methods of ethnography have also been applied by comparative religionists Marja Tiilikainen in her study on Somali Muslim women in Finland, Terhi Utriainen on women by the side of the dying, Måns Broo on Vaiṣṇava gurus, Mira Karjalainen on seamen, Mari Rahkala-Simberg on

By stating that I want to listen to the voice of low caste women and learn from them, I introduce the starting point of the ethnographic approach of this study. In short, it revolves around the questions of recognizing the contexts of the people studied, of accurate hearing, and of the right understanding.

According to the American anthropologist Clifford Geerz, right hearing requires knowledge of the context. Only after the context is "thickly described", that is, after exploring the details of the setting of the study, the informants, their symbolic system, and how the field work is carried out, is it possible to assess the likely sense and meanings underlying the behaviour of the people studied. Geerz argues that "Nothing is more necessary to comprehending what anthropological interpretation is, than exact understanding of what it means to say that our formulations of other people's symbol systems must be actor-oriented" (Geerz 1973, 14). Geerz criticizes anthropologists who casually claim that they "are seeing things from the actor's point of view" without really going into explicating what they mean by it. Saying that "my aim is to listen to the voice of low caste women", I have to admit that there are many acoustic barriers blocking the true tones from me, the main one being the insufficient understanding of the symbolic systems (practices, beliefs, concepts, world-views) of the cultures in this study. Confessing such a fact is – according to my understanding – what Geerz wants to emphasize as the key to a better understanding of foreign cultures. The value of an ethnographic study builds on the ability of the researcher to analyse and explain the probable influence of the barriers. Nevertheless, Geerz remains doubtful about ethnographic methods, and claims that even at its best "a cultural analysis is guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses, and drawing explanatory conclusions from the better guesses […]" (Geerz 1973, 20).

To identify those better guesses, researchers have some tools at their disposal. The linguistic anthropologist Kenneth Pike's *emic*/*etic* distinction, even if well worn and debated, proves to be worthwhile in this study.[11] The analogy of voice is again of use. Throughout this study, I will purposefully present relevant, authentic quotes of the interviews, which, as will become obvious, are not always clear and digestible at once. However, they are the voice, the lyrics of the actors, the *emics* that I am to listen to. My task, secondary to listening to the voice, is to give details about the context of the quotes, and to analyse and reflect them against the presumed main concepts and categories, the *etics*, of this study. It is my assumption that the main challenge lies in

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Greek Orthodox nuns, and Riku Hämäläinen on the role of shields within the Plains Indians' traditional culture and religion, to name but a few.

[11] Pike suggests that there are two points of view in the study of society's cultural systems: *emic* and *etic*, which are analogous to the two perspectives phonemic and phonetic, used in the study of linguistic sound systems. The *emic* view focuses on the intrinsic cultural distinctions that have significance to the members of a given society, whereas the *etic* view is dependent on the extrinsic concepts and categories that have meaning for the observer (Pike 1967, 37–41).

The *emic/etic* (insider/outsider) distinction has been a widely utilized, developed, and debated categorization in social and behavioural sciences, and in cultural anthropology in particular. See, for example, Ekstrand & Ekstrand 1986; Harris 1976, 1979; Headland & Pike & Harris 1990; Pelto 1970, to name but a few scholars. Within the discipline of comparative religion in Finland the terminology of *emic/etic* categories has been discussed and advanced, for example, by Gothóni 1981, 2002, 2011; Sakaranaho 1998; Sjöblom 2002.

acoustic acuity; how is the voice heard and received? At best, the voice nurtures the hypotheses of the interpretation and the construction of the concepts, and vice versa, the conceptual framework used enables me to identify non-heard tones within the voice.

In carrying out this study I will first record the exact procedure, timing, and setting of the rituals, and based on these I will try to understand and elicit the intentions and motivations of the women's ritual conduct. My questions are: why do these women perform rituals, and what do they wish to gain by devoting themselves to adhering to the ritual conduct? This research goal takes us into the heart of issues concerning the reliability of the anthropological interpretation. What is understanding? Or in other words, how can we hear the voice of others? According to the well-known view of Hans-Georg Gadamer, understanding is a linguistic event, historically conditioned, during which the worlds of the interpreter and the interpreted are fused in what he calls the "fusion of horizons".[12] A reliable interpretation consists of knowing the historically conditioned meanings of expressions used and the interpreters' awareness of their own, possibly different, cultural and historical context. Studying a culture which by some indicators is distant to the interpreter requires even more careful self-reflection on the premises and position of the interpreter in relation to the subjects of the research.

Gadamer says that the process of human understanding takes place in a "hermeneutical circle", in which the details of a text or other object are understood in the light of the whole text and the whole in turn is understood in the light of the details of the text.[13] A similar process happens in the course of ethnographic interpretation. As regards this study, the notion of the reciprocity within rituals is one of the starting points that throws light on the varied details of ritual conduct. Correspondingly, many details are approached in the light of this reciprocity.

Gadamer, similarly to Geerz, suggests that our weaknesses as cultural interpreters can work to our advantage if we can master those weaknesses. Prejudgements are inevitable and even necessary as they constitute our initial ability to experience (something as something), and consequently, help us to become more conscious of our particular hermeneutical situatedness.[14] According to Gadamer, this ability to experience and to master one's experience by identifying continuous changes is one of the key premises for understanding.[15] Experiencing as a way of understanding is most applicable in the study of the present time. A researcher may participate in the activities of the communities researched, and in my case, join the people in conducting their rituals. It goes without saying that my interpretation of the performance of Hindu rituals varies a great deal from the interpretation of women who are fully immersed in the ritual tradition in question. However, the experience, even if I do not get all the details at once, makes me more conscious of my pre-understanding and the possible lack of it.

[12] Gadamer 1995, 306–307; Gothóni 2011, 21–22; Gothóni 2002, 158–159.

[13] Gadamer 1995, 265–269.

[14] Gadamer 1995, 270–271; Gothóni 2011, 24–25; Gothóni 2002, 160.

[15] Gadamer 1995, 346–362; Gothóni 2011, 20–21.

The ethnographic process of this study, that is, the phases starting from the execution of the field work project up to production of the final ethnographic analysis, is discussed and described in detail in Chapter 3.

## Ritual study

If the research field of ethnography is a vast complex, studies on rituals are no less vast. The concept of ritual is widely utilised in the humanities and social sciences, and is also recognized in the natural sciences. It has been given numerous definitions and approached using a range of theoretical frames of reference. As the second main chapter of this study explores various views on ritual and ritual theory, this introductory part focuses on situating it in the web of ritual studies, and assessing its contribution.

In this research, ritual is entirely an *etic* concept, which is not addressed in the discourse of the people being studied. The closest native (Bengali) term denoting ritual is *ācāra*.[16] The ritual is a main category comprising, for example, *pūjās*, *bratas,* and *saṃskāras*, which are all types of rituals.[17] What they share is that they are directed to and performed for the veneration of a certain deity, deities, supernatural entity, spirit, or holy man, and that this veneration is marked by 'gift-giving' in the course of the ritual event. This study concerns religious rituals in particular, as distinct from 'rituals' which in casual conversation are referred to as rituals, but are more like routines, habits, or any mundane, repetitive activities lacking a supernatural orientation.

The study of ritual practices of Indian women is an academic research tradition, which has been carried out by Kathleen M. Erndl (1987, 1997, 2000), Julia Leslie (1992, 2000), June McDaniel (2003), Mary McGee (1987, 1991, 2000), Anne McKenzie Pearson (1996) and Tracy Pintchman (2007), to name but a few scholars. In this study women's rituals are seen as a way of both maintaining and challenging cultural conventions.[18] In line with Lina Fruzzetti (1990), Lina Gupta (1997) and Susan S. Wadley (1995), rituals are approached as the domain of women in the sense that they reflect the concerns, needs, fears and life histories of women in particular, if only to confirm the conventional notions of ideal wife and mother.

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[16] A Bengali term *ācāra* refers to 'religious or scriptural rules and prescriptions', 'rites', 'observance of rules and prescriptions', 'conduct', 'behaviour', 'custom' and 'practice' (Biswas 2000).

[17] The types of rituals will be discussed in greater detail later, but in short, *pūjā* means 'devotion', 'homage', 'worship', and is the most common religious practice in Hindu India. *Pūjā* can be performed in a private home, local shrine, or any Hindu temple, and it includes giving of offerings, at least flowers (Bowker 1997, 774; Flood 1996, 208). *Brata* (*vrata* in Sanskrit) is a fast or vow, a voluntary personal promise or resolve to undertake some course of action in a secular or religious context (see, for example, Bowker 1997, 1029; McGee 1991, 72–74; Pearson 1996, 2). *Saṃskāras,* often translated as rites of passage or sacraments, are ceremonials that are performed at the transitional periods of individual lives, such as birth, initiation, marriage and death. They are described in ancient Hindu texts on domestic rituals as well as in contemporary ritual handbooks. According to McGee, *saṃskāras* are thought "to mark different stages in the physical, psychological, and moral development of a Hindu while also preparing the person spiritually, socially, and culturally to assume the dharmic duties and responsibilities of adulthood" (McGee 2004, 333). See also Bowker 1997, 850; Klostermaier 1998, 163.

[18] See, for example, Banerjee 1989, 131–132; Gold 2003, 107–109; Raheja 1994, 5; 2003, 173; Sax 1994, 175.

Figure 1: Women's rituals reflect the concerns, needs, fears and life histories of women in particular.

It must be noted that women's rituals are mainly transmitted orally and flourish under the shadow of the authoritarian, scripture-based ritual tradition. In institutionalized Hindu rituals, women are hardly permitted the role of a viewer, whereas in rituals of their own women themselves are the subjects; they are the actors determining the objectives of their activity (see, for example, Gold 2003; Raheja 1994, 2003c; Gupta 1997). Ritual behaviour is thus seen as playing a part in building and strengthening women's identity and even in giving women psychological support and confidence by providing them with a channel to also express such feelings that ought not be shown.[19]

The main focus of this study is on the ritual practices related to mothering, which comprise not only birth rites, but also worship rites, calendary, and crisis rituals, which in one way or another are associated with mothering. The concept of a mothering ritual is not widely used, nor is there

[19] L. Gupta sees women's rituals fulfilling two purposes; they are preventive of pain and loss, and conducive to peace, prosperity, power and ultimate freedom (*mokṣa*). Gupta calls into question the common feminist argument that Hindu women contribute to their oppression by conforming to the religious guidelines, and that women's ritual conduct is a major hindrance on the way to female emancipation. In contrast, Gupta claims that women indeed regain and reaffirm their essential power by observing rituals. By participating in rituals, women ultimately redefine their own status (Gupta 1997, 97–98, 108).

any agreed definition of the term. Mothering rituals in the South Asian context are mostly studied as part of human fertility and birth rites and practices (Thérèse Blanchet 1984; Doranne Jacobson 1995a; Patricia and Roger Jeffery 1989, 1996; P.K. Maity 1989; Santi Rozario & Geoffrey Samuel 2002), or as part of the rites of passage (*saṃskāras*) (Kapur 1988; McGee 2004).[20]

Hélène Stork in her study on Tamil women and their mothering practices applies the concept of the mothering ritual in reference to procreation rituals in general (Stork 1992, 89–105). In my study the concept of the mothering ritual is a dominant category that comprises different types of rituals attached to motherhood. Those involve ritual activities promoting human fertility; various pre-natal, natal, and post-natal customs and *saṃskāras*; ritual activities observed for the well-being and protection of a child from evil effects and disease; and rituals activities mothers adhere to while seeking a cure for a sick child. In contrast to previous studies, my study emphasizes the mother's point of view; she is either the subject performing the rituals and seeking supernatural assistance in carrying out her duty, or she is the object for whose sake others perform a rite. This is not to say that fathers have no role in birth rituls. In post-natal rituals in particular fathers are traditionally active participants. They recite sacred verses and contribute to the adaptation of the child into the world. The focus of this study, however, is neither on fathers' viewpoint nor on fathering customs. Their role is considered only when they actively participate in the rituals predominantly done by mothers or for the sake of mothers.

### Study on popular Hindu religious traditions

The third field of research included in this thesis is the studies on popular or folk religion. This sample of women from three low caste communities throws light on popular Hinduism of common people in present-day India. In this sub-chapter I will introduce some viewpoints on the studies of Hindu traditions in general, and compare my work with previous research on popular Hinduism.[21] A detailed discussion on the theme will continue in Chapter 4.

The question of who is a Hindu is a classical one, asked by various authors, starting from Indian freedom fighter V.D. Savarkar (1923), who sought to define who ought to be identified as one

[20] Two Finnish anthropologists, Minna Säävälä and Heli Uusikylä, have explored fertility and birth practices in the South Asian context. Säävälä's research on fertility and procreation in South India (1997, 2001) and Uusikylä's study on birth culture in Bangladesh (2000) both give useful insights about the childbirth and childcare customs and traditions in the neighbouring regions.

[21] In Finland the work of a small circle of academics revolves around the Hindu religious traditions. Philosopher of religion Unto Tähtinen studied Mahatma Gandhi and non-violence principles. Internationally recognized indologist Asko Parpola has carried out extensive work on Indus script and seals. Parpola's article 'Jaiminiya texts and the first feeding of solid food' (1986) opens the textual background of one birth rite, thereby touching my research topic. Parpola has also made the effort to popularize Indian studies and edited a book *Intian Kulttuuri* (2005), among others. Indologists Klaus Karttunen and Bertil Tikkanen's academic work concerns mainly the linguistic traditions of India. As regards comparative religion, Kimmo Ketola has expertise in the Hare Krishna movement (2002), Måns Broo in Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism (2003), and Marie-Thérèse Charpentier in female gurus in India (2010). Tapio Tamminen has contributed to Hindu studies in Finland with several non-fiction publications on Indian society (1998, 2008).

and who ought to be excluded. The question of whether the communities of this study are Hindu is also relevant.[22] At the end of the nineteenth century, casteless and tribal people were mostly left outside 'the great religion'. H.H. Risley, in his historical two-volume work *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal* (first published in 1891), talks about "gradual Brahmanising of the aboriginal, non-Aryan, or casteless people", who "enrol themselves in the ranks of Hinduism" or "become converted to Hinduism", and "start worshiping Hindu gods" (Risley, Vol I, 1998, xv–xvii). The price of this elevation to Hindus was the denial of their previous identity: name, customs, and family history. Even nowadays, orthodox Brahmans – even if they would not necessarily exclude the low castes from the Hindu community – despise their religious practices due to the low caste people's lack of authority for correct and pure ritual conduct. Even if the low castes adopt the upper caste gods and goddesses and imitate their religious conduct, they are considered ineligible because of their birth and ignorance.[23]

Despite such Brahman hegemony, the women interviewed and their communities are addressed as Hindus, practitioners of Hindu *dharma*, simply on the grounds that they occasionally use this expression of themselves, and their religious practices are in many respects comparable to the Hindu community in general. In conversations with the people of the communities studied it became obvious that people identified themselves first as members of their occupational community (*jāti*), and secondly, according to the religious tradition their main deities represented. The determinant concept of Hindu was used mainly when people wanted to identify themselves in contrast to Muslims and Christians.

Hindu in the widest sense can be understood as an identity associated with systems of culture, philosophy, or religious traditions indigenous to the Indian subcontinent. The Constitution of India applies the word Hindu to all persons professing any Indian religion: Hinduism, Jain, Buddhist, Sikh.[24] In common use as well as in academic discourse, however, the term is attributed to a person who is an adherent of Hinduism.

The first task of each scholar studying Hindu traditions is to define precisely what the Hindu religion stands for in their study and how it will be approached.[25] One essential premise of this study is the notion that the unity of Hindus, among other things, is based on the principles of ritual conduct. According to ritual theorist Frits Staal "a Hindu may be a theist, pantheist, atheist,

[22] The term *hindu* was first used by Muslims to refer the native peoples of South Asia, particularly those who did not convert to Islam. Originally the term derives from the Indo-Aryan word *sindhu* (sea), applied also to the Indus river. Persians modified the term to *hind*; they also used it to refer to the land of the Indus valley. When the term was imported to Latin and Greek, it changed to *india*, which became a geographical designation for all the unknown territories beyond the Indus (Davis 1998, 5).

[23] See, for example, McGee 2004, 335–336; Nicholas 1995.

[24] The Constitution of India: Religious Rights. Article 25.

[25] There is no commonly agreed dogma or sacred corpus of Hindus, even though as a consequence of the interaction with European Christianity, the principles of Hindu traditions were organized in the form of the Western religions. Little by little foreign categories such as religion and caste have given way to indigenous categories, and in recent studies of Indian culture the great diversity of the native traditions has gained greater acknowledgement (Davis 1998, 44–48).

communist and believe whatever he likes, but what makes him into a Hindu are the ritual practices he performs and the rules to which he adheres, in short, what he *does*" (Staal 1996, 389). Many contemporary ritual elements within popular Hinduism can be traced back to public (*śrauta*) and domestic (*gṛhya*) rituals of Vedic Aryans. Scientist of religion Richard H. Davis traces the historical origins of the Hindu unity in stating that "Vedic sacrifice is the privileged mode of ritual conduct, the template for all subsequent Indian ritualism" (Davis 1998, 6). The main principles of Vedic sacrifice rest on reciprocity, the mutual contract of exchange between Vedic gods and humans. Accordingly, the heart of the ritual command in the Hindu context is giving and exchanging gifts between the deity and devotee. This ritual pattern has stood firm whereas the meanings and interpretations of the rituals have adjusted to the times.[26] In a similar vein, I suggest that the low caste women interviewed are Hindus in the sense that the basic mode of their ritual practice derives from the same root as all the Hindu rituals since the time prior to the first written Sanskrit records.

As a result of Western anthropological studies on village communities, the terms great and little traditions were created; in the Indian religious context the great denoted the authoritarian classical Sanskrit tradition based on the Vedas, while the little signified the popular traditions of a local and oral nature.[27] This division has rightfully been debated and considered artificial, but it serves as a justification for studies on popular religious traditions as distinct from the text-oriented classical Hindu tradition. Since I define this work as a study on popular religion, the great and little distinction is relevant to a certain extent, but it remains insufficient. In exploring the religious practices of common people outside the religious institutions it becomes obvious that religious practice and oral tradition are connected to the textual tradition by multiple strands, and that the two traditions mingle in countless ways.[28]

Studies on Bengali popular religion and culture are abundant.[29] The writings of two scholars, cultural historian Sumanta Banerjee and historian of religion June McDaniel, are of great value

[26] Empirical and historical studies of ritual from different parts of the world support this view; the ritual forms have survived the passage of time while the interpretations vary, even drastically, in different circumstances (Staal 1996, 117).

[27] The little and great were first introduced by anthropologist Robert Redfield 1973 (1956), 1–16, benefitting from the work of McKim Marriot 1972 (1955), 187–191, who was first to contrast the Indian village religion with the Sanskrit textual tradition.

[28] This notion is, for example, supported by those scholars who have a pluralist view of Hinduism (Davis 1998, 6–7).

[29] Fabrizio M. Ferrari has specialized in folklore and his works include studies on the Dharma cult, the goddess Śītalā and the Śaiva feast of Gājan. He has also been interested in gender roles in the ritual context and in medical anthropology, ritual healing and possession (2007, 2010a, 2010b). Lina Fruzzetti has conducted studies on marriage rituals and various issues concerning gender, ritual and kinship in the Bengali context (1990, 2006). Sarah Lamb has specialized in expressive traditions of Bengal (2003). Besides fertility, Maity has charted the Manasā cult and various folk rituals in Eastern India (1966, 1988, 1989). Sibendu Manna's work discusses the mother goddess Caṇḍī and goddess worship (1993), E.A. Morinis has explored Bābā Tāraknāth and other folk traditions of Bengalis (1983), Ralph W. Nicholas's research themes comprise caste, marriage and village goddesses, among others (1982, 1995, 2008); Rebati Mohan Sarkar specializes in rural cults and traditions of the Bengal region (1986); a Finnish anthropologist, Sirpa Tenhunen, has addressed issues related to gender, gift, and women's wage work (1997, 2006); Ákos Östör has charted religious feasts of Bengalis such as Durgāpūjā and Gājan (1984, 1997).

in piecing together the historical development of the religious tenets and practices of contemporary Bengalis. Banerjee has explored the Bengali popular mind through a number of studies on popular religious movements (1989, 2002), while McDaniel has charted tantric practices, cults, and holy men and women (1989, 2001, 2003, 2004, 2007).

### Study on women and religion

This study also connects with studies on women and religion and draws from the academic work done on gender issues related to India. The views of both Western and Indian feminists will be discussed. Two main, interconnecting facets on ritual practice have been advanced by feminist discourse: First, women's rituals in many respects confirm male superiority, and second, women's rituals essentially nurture the construction of women's identity and role as wife and mother. [30] I join this debate by introducing the views of a group of low caste women, which, I assume, will be supportive of both stands.

My study is also closely linked to the research of the so-called supernatural feminine.[31] Within women's studies, the crucial research questions deal with the relationship between the female deities and women. Scholars have discussed, for example, the ambivalence of different expressions of the feminine principle within the Hindu tradition, goddesses as potential role models and agents maintaining the social order, and the possibility of goddess worship turning into opportunities for the liberation of women.[32] The state of West Bengal is well known for its orientation to Śākta Hindu traditions, which indicate the dominance of goddess worship. The aspects of the divine feminine will be elaborated in more detail in Chapters 4 and 5.

### Societal contribution

In addition to scholarly contribution this study has value as a description and portrait of the everyday life and living conditions of inhabitants of three contemporary urban slums. It contributes to an understanding of both the vitality and creativity and the hard work and endurance of the women who cope with the hardships of life way under any designation of the poverty line. This study provides information about the mothering practices, birth customs, and traditional healing methods still prevalent alongside modern health care, and discusses the prevailing attitudes and beliefs in regard to the position of women. With the sample of three communities this study also

[30] See, for example, Babb 1996; Erndl 2002; Gupta 1997; Harlan & Courtright 1995; Leslie & McGee 2000; McDaniel 2007; Wadley 1977, 1980, 1988, 1995c.

[31] On goddess traditions of India see, for example, Coburn 1998; Erndl 1987, 1997, 2007; Hawley & Wulff 1982, 1998; Kinsley 1986, 1998, 2003; Pintchman 1994, 2001, 2002.

[32] See, for example, Gross 2002; Gupta 1997; Hiltebeitel & Erndl 2002; Humes 1997, 2002; Kurtz 2002; Pintchman 1994, 2002, 2007; Rosen 1999a; Sherma 2002; Young 1999.

throws light n the process of grass-root-level modernization of contemporary Indian society and the challenges involved.

## 1.5 Ethical considerations

During one interview, which was carried out in the home of one middle aged mother, the son of the interviewed mother interrupted us and wanted us to stop the tape-recording. The mother tried to calm the son down and explained that there was no reason to worry or to become angry, and that she had agreed to the interview. The son questioned ferociously my motives in interviewing his mother. He accused me of taking advantage of his mother and selling the story to my native country. I politely discontinued the interview and gave him an explanation.

In spite of this one occasion, the attitudes towards my fieldwork in low caste neighbourhoods of Kolkata were mainly positive. Nevertheless, the above-mentioned event made me consider some ethical issues related to the fieldwork. The main ethical questions of this study concerned two issues: first, securing the anonymity of the interviewees, and second, explaining to the interviewees what purpose the research served and how the obtained data would be used. The research-ethical starting point was to keep the interviewed women unidentifiable, which meant that I was to operate with pseudonyms instead of real names, and that I would not introduce personal details that would reveal my interviewees' identity.[33] In the field, I made my intention public and answered people's questions about this study, and thus made sure that the interviewees and their families knew how the information they were sharing would be used.

Another important ethical question concerns my position in the research fields. I co-operated openly with a non-governmental-organization (NGO) of Lutheran World Service India (LWSI), which was implementing a community development initiative in the studied neighbourhoods. It is necessary to assess how and in what respect this connection influenced the research process and data.[34] The people in the three communities were certainly aware of the economic support that the NGO was drawing from foreign donators. There is no denying that in the beginning of the fieldwork I was considered as a representative of those donators and that it had an effect on my fieldwork. To avoid false expectations and misunderstanding, I had to pay special attention to explaining precisely what I was there for and to avoid giving people any hope of economic sup-

[33] The Academy of Finland, in keeping with the guidelines of the National Advisory Board on Research Ethics, provides that researchers apply "ethically sustainable data collection, research and evaluation methods conforming to scientific criteria", and practise "openness intrinsic to scientific knowledge in publishing their findings" (Academy of Finland Guidelines on Research Ethics). In carrying out this research I am accountable not only to the research community, but first and foremost, to the interviewed women and their families, and to the people of the three communities among whom the study was carried out. I am obliged to verify that this study project is in no way harmful to them nor does it violate their integrity. On ethical guidelines on ethnography, see for example, Utriainen 2010; Whiteford & Trotter 2008, 6, 8–10.

[34] According to good scientific practice, "the sources of financing and other associations relevant to the conduct of research are made known to those participating in the research" (Academy of Finland Guidelines on Research Ethics).

port from me. I did not want to give any reason for people to believe that I was 'buying' information from them.

The third ethical question is about the translation of the interviews. How could it be guaranteed that the translations of the interviews were as correct and authentic as possible? According to research ethical guidelines, misconduct in science is manifested if there is "negligence in recording and preserving results" (Academy of Finland Guidelines on Research Ethics).[35] Translating the interviews occasionally proved very challenging, since there was no means to verify the exact meanings and references of the words used. I had to rely on the general definition of a particular word. With respect to direct quotes of the interviewees, I abide by the following principles: The quotes are translated word for word as accurately as possible, yet respecting English grammar and the reader, who should be able to follow and understand what is being said. For example, the usage of tenses in Bengali cannot be followed slavishly, because it does not make sense in English. If it is impossible to give a translation that does justice to a Bengali text, I try to clarify the point by explaining the essence of the crucial Bengali terms within the footnotes. The interviews were repeatedly interrupted by people wanting to comment on the issues raised in the interview, or by some exterior matter catching the interviewee's attention. To mark these pauses within the interviewees' quotes I use brackets and three dots.

## 1.6 Tools for the reader: overview of the thesis

*Bengali language in the foreground*

Since this study is located in the area where Bengali has a major foothold and the majority of interviews were carried out in the Bengali language, it is my intention to use the language to give depth to my ethnographical interpretation.[36] This will be realized in two ways: I will disclose the Bengali term in brackets as often as I think it would be enlightening for the reader who understands Bengali, and I will choose, in most cases, a Bengali version of the terms which exist and are also used in other Indian languages. If the term, concept, or name has a widely established (Sanskrit) form, the Bengali version will be omitted. However, the interviewees' direct quotes will remain authentic. In transliterating the Bengali terms I will use the standard Sanskritic system of transliteration. Even if not very satisfactory for Bengali, it is still convenient for it is well-known and used for all South Asian languages.[37]

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[35] In human communication there is always the chance of misapprehension.The risk that a researcher does not understand or even misunderstands the interviewed is greater the more different the cultural background. In this study the risk of misinterpretation of research data is high, yet it is not done intentionally. I will discuss the methods used to avoid misunderstanding and misinterpretation in Chapter 3.

[36] During most of the recorded interviews a Bengali-speaking interpreter was present, but I tried to communicate directly with the person being interviewed as much as possible. The role and influence of the interpreter and the imperfection of my language skills are discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

[37] The standard Sanskritic system of transliterating Bengali is presented, for example, by William Radice 1994, 47.

*The four parts of the study*

This study is divided into four parts: After the introductory Part I, Part II follows with an argumentation on the main theoretical (Chapter 2) and methodological (Chapter 3) premises and principles. Part III presents the informants and venue (Chapter 4), and an analysis of the ethnographic data (Chapter 5), while Part IV discusses the major conclusions based on the research observations (Chapter 6).

Chapter 2 is dedicated to the concept of ritual, and answers the question of how ritual is approached in this study. The theoretical considerations concern mainly the various implications of the gift and reciprocity of the gift in the context of ritual conduct.

Chapter 3 describes the ethnographic process of this study and evaluates the research data in the light of that process. I will introduce all parties involved in the process, and weigh their impact on it. The approach to the ethnographic analysis is also clarified and examined in detail.

Chapter 4 introduces the setting of this study: the interviewees and their communities. The socio-demographic description of the interviewees, the examination of their cultural and religious background, and the definition of their position within a caste society, all explain the different aspects of the women studied.

Chapter 5 presents a classification of the different types of mothering rituals and practices based on the ethnographic analysis of this study. The main categories comprise the rituals performed in the hope of an offspring, birth rituals, and rituals pursuing the well-being of the child.

Chapter 6 not only discusses the conclusions of this study but identifies some research topics that would be fruitful for further research on this theme.

# PART II: RITUAL STUDY – THEORIES AND METHODS

# 2 Reciprocity of gifts in the ritual context

## 2.1 Given by god (in return)

In Harijan Basti, one of the neighbourhoods where the fieldwork was carried out, I was told that for some time a young couple had tried unsuccessfully to have a child. People in the neighbourhood gossiped openly about their misfortune. The couple was clearly anxious about the situation, and it brought about tension especially for the young wife, who was judged as carrying the stigma of being infertile (*bāñjā*).

Raji, an elderly lady, was often consulted for advice by younger women in her neighbourhood.[38] This is what she told about women who were worried about becoming pregnant:

> If they do not get a baby many people go to god (*ṭhākura*). […] Yes, many people go to god. There was one family in this neighbourhood. They had been married for twelve years but did not get a baby. They went to Puri and promised to give an offering (*mānasika karā*). And they got a son. […] The woman told me that God (*Bhagavān*) gave her a son.[39]

Many people coming from different cultural backgrounds would consider it normal if parents or grandparents expressed their joy over a long-awaited newborn family member by saying: "This child is given by god" or "the baby is truly a gift from god". The family whose story Raji quotes is convinced that their child is given by god. What makes the quote noteworthy is that the child is believed to be given as a return gift following the family's efforts of pilgrimage and loyalty towards a particular god. As a childless couple they had reasoned that getting a child would require certain sacrifices on their part. The couple had gone to Puri, a famous Vaiṣṇava pilgrimage site in the state of Orissa, and had promised to give an offering (*mānasika karā*) to the divinity of the sacred place. They believed that in exchange – pleased by their effort – the deity had granted them a baby son.

However, the exchange of gifts does not end with the birth of a child. The family must fulfil their promise (*mānasika deoyā*), which involves continuous loyalty to the deity by visiting the sacred site and by giving the deity favourable offerings. As the child matures, he requires protection from misfortune and disease, and again the family feels obliged to approach the divinity, who, they believe, can provide the child with success and well-being in exchange for their loyalty. The reciprocal relationship and gift exchange between the devotee and deity proceed similarly.

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[38] Raji's interview was recorded in her neighbourhood in Kolkata, 5 February 2004.

[39] In this quote, Raji uses two different terms referring to god or divinity, *ṭhākura* and *Bhagavān*. In the discourse of the people of her community the term *ṭhākura* was usually – not always – used when people talked about a visible idol, a god effigy, or other image of a certain divinity. *Ṭhākura* was a deity that was to be seen and personally met. *Bhagavān,* for its part, was God or Lord in general. *Bhagavān* was used in reference to 'any (Hindu) God' or to one of the great Hindu gods such as Viṣṇu.

This story introduces the essential reasoning involved in the ritual behaviour of the women in this study. In what follows, I will discuss the theoretical starting points that I rely on in examining the ritual conduct of the women interviewed. First, I will present some 'strategies' the women introduced in distinguishing the sacred. Then, I will discuss the various aspects of gift-giving, gift exchange, and reciprocity related to ritual conduct. This will be followed by a review of the contents of the material and immaterial gifts in the ritual context of Hindus.

## 2.2 Distinguishing the sacred

In a group interview, Ganti women explained that if they wanted to pray to the goddess Mā Ṣaṣṭhī they could take almost any object – whether a stone, vessel, or statue – draw a holy mark (*ṭikā*) on it, and consider it the deity.[40] This statement suggests that shifting from the profane towards the sacred is outwardly simple; even an everyday tool may be taken to represent the sacred. This raises the questions of what makes something sacred and on what basis the distinction between the sacred and profane is made. Ritual theorist Catherine Bell invites us "to draw attention to the way in which certain social actions strategically distinguish themselves in relation to other actions" (Bell 1992, 74). Bell suggests that "ritualization is a matter of various culturally specific strategies for setting some activities off from others, for creating and privileging a qualitative distinction between the 'sacred' and 'profane' (Bell 1992, 74). In the case of Ganti women, the culturally specific strategy used to distinguish the sacred was the social action of drawing a holy mark on an otherwise trivial item, which then animated the item and consecrated it to represent a divinity.

While carrying out the fieldwork it occurred to me that the borderline between the sacred and profane was often obscure. The same social actions could be understood and interpreted as both profane and sacred. This was also the case with domestic duties such as keeping the property clean and cooking for the family: Cleaning, for example, was not only wiping and washing the dust and dirt from physical objects; it was also considered to be part of the daily domestic rituals. Cleaning was also done in order to purify the home from harmful influence, and to prepare the human body for the competence to perform a ritual. Thus the social action of cleaning, while involving a fully mundane aim, was also significant because of a sacred purpose.

Similar two-sided social actions were cooking and eating: Women prepared food in order to feed the family but also to offer it to a deity to enjoy. The food offered to a deity (*bhoga*) was believed to be transformed into a gift from god (*prasāda*), and was eaten as such after the deity had first consumed the food. Eating *prasāda* was thought to have other meanings besides eating a

[40] Fieldwork diary, 16 September 2003 and 12 January 2008. *Tikā* is an auspicious mark smeared usually with vermilion or sandal wood paste or ash on the forehead of a person (usually at the closing of *pūjā*). The official installation of an image or icon of a Hindu deity is thought to require its animation through elaborate ceremonies called *prāṇa-pratiṣṭhā.* At the conclution of the ceremony the deity is thought to take up residence in the image (Lipner 1999, 280). The drawing of a holy mark fulfilled the same function for my Gantian informants.

casual dinner with the family (as will be later elaborated). Thus, cooking and eating could also be distinguished as sacred actions in addition to being everyday activities.

My informants' strategies for setting the sacred apart from similar everyday matters typically involved obedience to particular rules and codes of conduct, which relied on various beliefs. For example, the drawing of a holy mark (*ṭikā*) was believed to invoke a deity into a vessel, and sprinkling the house with the water of the holy river Ganges was thought to have a different effect than cleaning the house with water from a nearby well. Furthermore, cooking in a certain manner with utensils and ingredients that were thought to please the deity made the food special and thus suitable to be offered to a deity. To identify these strategies is an essential precondition for understanding the ritual behaviour of my informants, since obviously not all everyday tools represent a deity, food is not always a gift from god (*prasāda*) and bathing is not always done for ritual cleansing; this is only true when they are specified for such purposes through "a culturally specific strategy".

## 2.3 Remarks on the theories of gift

The social action of giving gifts – on equal terms with cleaning, cooking, or eating – may also be a sacred practice distinct from similar ordinary activity. In the context of ritual conduct, gift-giving has special resonance and implications, which will now be discussed in more detail. In one of his early treatises on religious behaviour at its primitive stage, Edward B. Tylor states: "As prayer is a request made to a deity as if he were a man, so sacrifice is a gift made to a deity as if he were a man. The human types of both may be studied unchanged in social life to this day" (Tylor 1977 [1889], 375). Tylor envisions the origin of sacrifice as a suppliant who bows before his chief, laying a gift at his feet – which in practice, and in its simplest form, happened in the women's rituals examined in this study. Tylor's attempt to classify the sacrifices is based on the idea of cultures' progression, which is indicated by "the manner in which the offering is given by the worshipper, and received by the deity" (Tylor 1977, 375). At the early stage of culture, according to Tylor, people give gifts to deities "as yet no definite thought how the receiver can take and use it" and "the deity takes and values the offering for itself" (Tylor 1977, 375–376). At the later stages, the gift-giving, "in spite of a growing conviction that after all the deity does not need [it] and cannot profit by it", is thought to express the idea of mere homage, or a negative view in which virtue lies in the worshipper depriving himself of something prized (Tylor 1977, 375–376, 397).

While Tylor's account offers some useful insight, it is insufficient in many aspects. First, it is unconvincing that the giver – even in a 'primitive culture' – was so apathetic and indifferent that she or he would not think in terms of the use of giving. Second, as regards the sacrificer's motives or reason for the gift, Tylor has no reference other than the idea of the common man giving presents to the great man – an analogy of the sacrificer and the deity – in order "to gain good, avert evil, to ask aid, or to condone offence" (Tylor 1977, 393). Third, it may be questioned whether the idea of gift-giving out of mere homage is at all credible. The main criticism against

Tylor's view on sacrifice is directed to his tendency to consider gift-giving merely as an individual and not as a social phenomenon.[41] According to Valerio Valeri, Tylor falls short in specifying the effects of the gift and fails to recognize that the gift given symbolizes the sacrificer, the god and the aim of sacrifice, and thus instantiates a relationship between man and god.[42] Valeri, for his part, sees sacrifice as having four distinct functions. First, sacrifice is a gift to gods and part of a process of exchange between gods and humans. Second, it is a communion between man and god through a meal. Third, it is efficacious representation, and fourth, a cathartic act.[43] The first function corresponds closely to the view endorsed in this study.

Tylor's account on sacrifice is also challenged by sociologist Marcel Mauss, whose conception of the gift led the scholarly discussion on gift-giving down entirely new paths. Mauss' early treatises on sacrifice (first published in 1899) discuss the Vedic principle of sacrifice as a gift that compels the deity to reciprocate. These studies already foreshadow Mauss' later view of the reciprocity of the gift. In the foreword of Mauss' most influential work, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, Mary Douglas sums up his view as follows: "It is not merely that there are no free gifts in a particular place, […] it is that the whole idea of a free gift is based on misunderstanding" (Douglas 1990, vii). Mauss discussed the gift and gift-giving as a social and group action, and not as an individual action. Society, as a "total social phenomena", in order to function, supposes "total services", which according to Mauss, almost always take "a form of the gift, the present generously given even when […] really there is obligation and economic self-interest" (Mauss 1990, 3).[44] This idea – interpreted and developed by a number of scholars – is usually understood the way Finnish theologian Risto Saarinen summarizes it: "If somebody offers you a gift, this person is increasing his or her social status and putting you in his or her debt" (Saarinen 2005, 18). In accordance with this scheme, "the whole society can be described through monitoring the circulation of exchanges which creates the duties and social obligations of its members" (Saarinen 2005, 18).

A basic question that drove Mauss' inquiry of the gift was: "What power resides in the object given that causes its recipient to pay it back?" (Mauss 1990, 3). In the discussion of this question Mauss developed a theory of three obligations, according to which "the institution of total services does not merely carry with it the obligation to reciprocate presents received. It also supposes two other obligations just as important: the obligation, on the other hand, to give presents, and on the other, to receive them" (Mauss 1990, 13). The three obligations engage the giver and the receiver in the system of reciprocity in which "the objects (given gifts) are never completely sep-

[41] Scholarly criticism of Tylor's views of sacrifice are discussed, for example, by Hasu 1999, 491; Kuper 2005, 84–85.

[42] Valeri 1985, 63.

[43] Valeri 1985, 62.

[44] Mauss' concept of "system of total services" is related to his view of the particularity of the archaic society in which it is not simply goods with calculable use-value that are exchanged but also dances, rituals, hospitality, and different types of services (Johnson 2003, 33–34; Mauss 1990, 5–6). Several scholars prefer to use the French term *prestations* instead of the English term services.

arated from the men who exchange them" (Mauss 1990, 31).[45] However, the function of the three is distinct in a sense that giving represents the necessary initial step for the creation and maintenance of social relationships whereas receiving is to agree to the social bond; reciprocating the gift, for its part, determines one's honour and wealth. The withdrawal from this circle of obligations or failure to meet the expectations indicates not less than the loss of status and prestige.[46]

Even though Mauss applies his conception of the interested gift, in the first place, to the functioning of the societies, his fourth theme comprises the mythological element – presents made to gods and men who represent them – which, according to Mauss "plays [a] part in this system and moral code relating to presents", but which, compared to other parts of his study, is much less developed (Mauss 1990, 14).[47] A gift to god, in Mauss' account, is more or less equivalent to an act of sacrifice – and the other possible aspects of the gift are practically ignored.[48] In spite of the criticism Mauss' view on sacrifice has been subjected to, I will identify a few useful points relevant to my study: Mauss argues that the theory of sacrifice is based on "the relationships that exist between the contracts and exchanges among humans and those between men and gods" (Mauss 1990, 15). Spirits and gods are believed to be "there to make a contract" with men and "with which men had to enter into contract" since "it is they who are the true owners of the things and possessions of this world" (Mauss 1990, 16). Mauss continues somewhat mysteriously: "With them (gods and spirits) it was most necessary to exchange, and with them it was most dangerous not to exchange. Yet, conversely, it was with them it was easiest and safest to exchange" (Mauss 1990, 16).

The logic here, if not clear at once, is much like the story at the beginning of this chapter: The gods are thought to manage and control events and the share of goods, and it is they whom men necessarily have to link with – to make contracts – in order to survive, and receive benefits and protection. Gods and spirits, as owners of things, set a price for each contract, and human beings for their part, must "purchase" their desires from the gods through gift-giving. In the opening story "the purchase" the couple wanted to make was a child. The price, they suggested, was the pilgrimage to a sacred place where they offered gifts to the deity of that site. The contract, the condition negotiated for the child, was the promise of loyalty and gifts to that particular deity.

Mauss suggests that gift-giving can influence spirits and gods in various ways. It is believed, for example, that purchases may have an effect on the mind of the spirit or that they have the capacity to turn evil spirits into benevolent ones. It is also thought that purchases can function as a

[45] The same idea was initiated by Valeri, who criticized Tylor for not taking it into account.

[46] Mauss 1990, 8.

[47] See the criticism, for example, by Godelier 1999, 31; Godelier 2002, 22–24. According to Godelier, Mauss by excluding sacred objects from his analysis unintentionally fostered the illusion that exchange was the be-all and end-all of social life, whereas Godelier sees the obligation to give gifts to the gods as a template for the hierarchical effect of gift-giving: since the gods can never be fully repaid, those humans who give most are elevated to quasi-godlike status (Godelier 1999, 30, 69).

[48] Mauss is criticized for the constricted understanding of sacrifice (Staal 1996, 69).

means to buy peace between men and gods by being able to weaken the evil consequences that naturally follow wrongdoings.[49] Among the interviewed women and their communities there existed a strong conviction of the correlation between the price and the effect of the gift; the more valuable the gift, the greater the influence. Similarly, people were to give more valuable gifts when asking for something they urgently required or longed for.

Sacrifice, according to Mauss' view, involves destruction, which makes it "an act of giving that is necessarily reciprocated" (Mauss 1990, 16). Godelier rewrites Mauss' view in saying that "men make gifts to the gods in the form of offerings and destruction of the things offered. Victims are sacrificed, the aroma of the incense and the smoke of the sacrifices rise up to the gods, and in some cases the flesh of the sacrificed animals is consumed. To sacrifice is to give by destroying what is given" (Godelier 1999, 30). According to Mauss, the purpose of such destruction is to make sacrifice capable of compelling the gods and of making the gods to give in return – even a "considerable thing in the place of a small one" (Mauss 1990, 16–17). The destructive aspect of the sacrifice is realized most concretely in the practices of human and animal sacrifice, but can take other modes as well: Suffering and abstinence in the form of, for instance, fasting or walking long distances to sacred places, can be understood as a kind of personal destruction – a gift of suffering – which is given to the deity in the hope that the deity will look with favour upon the giver.

Godelier criticizes Mauss for reducing the giving of gifts to the gods "to the hold that humans claim to have over the gods" (Godelier 1999, 30). According to Godelier, Mauss "should have taken into account the fact that the gods are free to give or not [to give], and that the men approaching the gods are already in their debt, since it is from them [the gods] that they have already received the conditions of their existence" (Godelier 1999, 30). Mauss fails to discuss the implications of the fact that the gods are thought to be superior to humans, and the givers inferior to the godly recipients. As regards the question of how the women interviewed for this study positioned themselves in relation to the gods, the unambiguous premise is that they thought themselves inferior and in most cases indebted to the deities. A deity's discontent caused by a devotee's lack of attentiveness in keeping the deity calm and satisfied with favourable gifts was considered as a serious potential threat for humans. Thus, gifts not only functioned as a means to purchase favours from the deities but also as a necessary compensation for the debt people had to pay for their existence.

## 2.4 Notions of gift in India

Mauss' notion of gift circulation as the bedrock of social interconnectedness – and as the bond between men and gods – is both agreed with and challenged by South Asian views of the gift.[50] To begin with, sacrifice, as already mentioned in the introductory chapter, played a vital role in

[49] Mauss 1990, 16–17.

[50] See, for example, Heim 2004; Raheja 1988; Trautmann 1981.

the Vedic religion. The entire Veda more or less serves the purpose of providing formulae for the performance of sacrifice (*yajña*), whose purpose was no less than to keep the universe in motion and to promote the well-being of the whole society.[51] The principles of Vedic sacrifice essentially rest on reciprocity, the mutual obligations of exchange between the Vedic gods and humans.[52] The efficacy of the sacrifice was thought to depend on the kind of offering made. At its simplest, Vedic ritual involves making of oblations by throwing offerings into a consecrated fire (*homa*) and by offering juice of the *soma* plant.[53] Sacrifices, first and foremost, were thought to provide the gods with the strength to maintain the cosmic order, but they were also believed to have the capacity to expiate sins and to bestow humans with power. In contemporary ritual behaviour – at least among the women participating in this study – the same conception of reciprocity is still valid: Gods are believed to crave human services and gifts, and devotees, while giving offerings and sacrifices to the gods as part of their rituals, desire returns on their investments.

However apparent the reciprocal feature of the Vedic sacrifice, other aspects are worth taking into account as regards gift-giving in the South Asian context. Scientist of religion Maria Heim in her comparative study on Hindu, Buddhist and Jain reflections on the gift (*dāna*) has explored the characteristics of gift-giving particularly in the context of *dharma* (law, the norms of civilized people) as it is perceived in selected parts of classical legal texts of Dharmaśāstra.[54] Heim, in the same manner as historian Thomas Trautmann, makes a point of comparing her views on Dharmaśāstra with Mauss' theorizing of the gift. Trautmann argues that "Mauss' thesis provides a useful foil against which to highlight the peculiarities of the Indian theory" (Trautmann 1981, 279). However, Mauss' view is about sociology of reciprocity whereas the Dharmaśāstra theory of the gift is soteriological and concerned with the gift as a religious endeavor.[55] According to Heim, Trautmann's view does not do justice either to Mauss or Dharmaśāstra, since it "misses the elements of ethical reflection apparent in both works" (Heim 2004, 12). The essential starting point of Heim's account is to approach the classical legal treatises as moral reflections. Heim, while admitting that "the orientation of the texts when discussing the fruit of *dāna* are aimed at transcendent rewards", argues that "in an important sense Dharmaśāstra *dāna* theory is con-

[51] Lipner 1999, 32–33. It was the duty of kings to arrange for public sacrifices for the well-being of their people (see, for example, Heim 2004, 117).

[52] Reciprocity rests on the idea of *do ut des* (in Latin): I give in order that you may give. Similarly, sacrifice is given in order to evoke a gift in return. See, for example, Heim 2004, 117. Interestingly, the notion of reciprocity underlying the Vedic sacrifice worked also for Mauss as one of his starting points for his exploration of the gift (Douglas 1990, ix).

[53] *Soma* may refer to a plant, a drink made of the *soma* plant, or the God Soma. The ritual sequence of the *soma* sacrifice requires offering *soma* to the deities and the drinking of *soma* by the sacrificer. The power of *soma* is manifested in the God Soma (Bowker 1997, 440, 913; Flood 1996, 40–43).

[54] Heim's main source is the brahmanical tradition of Hinduism as it is described in Dharmaśāstra literature, particularly in the compendia of *Dāna-nibandhas* composed primarily between 1000-1300 CE (Heim 2004, xvi). The concept of *dāna* has derived from that of *dakṣiṇā. Dakṣiṇā* is discussed in the sacred Hindu writings since the *Ṛgveda*. Acharya specifies the difference between the two concepts by stating that "*dakṣiṇā* is supposed to be the sacrificial fees while *dāna* is a spontaneous voluntary offering made to a recipient irrespective of any return or any sacrifice from him" (Acharya 1993, 4).

[55] Trautmann 1981, 279.

cerned with life *in this world* and how to describe the idealized workings of social etiquette and culture" (Heim 2004, 13). Based on her findings, particularly in regard to 'this worldly' aspects of the gift, Heim challenges Mauss' principle of reciprocity.

For Mauss, the obligation to give, to receive, and to reciprocate, functions as the bedrock of human moral relations and social interconnectedness. Heim questions this view by saying that "according to all formal discussion on it", the South Asian *dāna* "is not obligated in any way. It does not evoke return from the recipient, and is not premised on a notion of reciprocity and interdependence" (Heim 2004, 34). The Dharmaśāstra idealizes the righteous gift, which is given disinterestedly, and which "does not and should not inspire gratitude from the recipient" (Heim 2004, 34). The gift is thought, by some Dharmaśāstra authors, to be fruitless or even demonic if it is given for the sake of having the favour returned. Ideally, it is "seen but not recognized as a gift and so no element of gratitude or reciprocity can enter in" (Heim 2004, 35–36).[56] Comparing Mauss' views on gift and the *dāna* ideals recorded in Dharmaśāstra involves some imbalance that cannot be overlooked. While Mauss describes the functioning of primitive societies as he observes and interprets it, and then constructs his theory accordingly, *dāna* theory based on Dharmaśāstra does not aim at describing the state of affairs. Instead, classical legal texts suggest ideals. Thus, Heim's account of the features of South Asian gift-giving contributes to an understanding of Indian ideals of social etiquette as they are perceived in the medieval brahmanical tradition, but these views are hardly applicable to the contemporary administration of gift-giving, for instance, in a low caste community. As regards my research data, the idea closest to the disinterested gift was presented by some interviewees, who said that they either loved the god or loved doing rituals so much that they wanted to abide by the god's order and offer the god his or her favourite presents. However, women's discourse about the motives underlying ritual practice mainly revolved around the goals and fruits the devotee was supposed to harvest as a consequence of the ritual conduct.

In Indian thought the idea of the unmotivated gift already had a footing in textual sources dating earlier than the medieval Dharmaśāstra. The often quoted ritual definition is from the *Śrauta Sūtras* of the late Vedic period, according to which, ritual comprises three elements: the substance which is used in oblations (*dravya*); the deity to which the oblations are offered (*devatā*); and the renunciation of the fruits of the ritual acts (*tyāga*).[57] The renunciation is a formula pronounced at the culmination of each act of oblation and its purpose is to renounce the fruit, the effect of ritual. The conclusions of this conception of ritual are in line with the ideal *dāna*: Rituals ought to be performed for their own sake, not for attaining goals, and the fruits of ritual activity are temporarily unseen and become apparent only in afterlife.[58]

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[56] Heim sees congruence between the Dharmaśāstra ideals and philosopher Jacques Derrida's notion of what is the true gift: According to Derrida, "for there to be [a] gift, not only must the donor or donee not perceive or receive the gift as such, have no consciousness of it, no memory, no recognition; he or she must also forget it right away" (Derrida 1992, 16).

[57] The *Śrauta Sūtras* were formulated between the eighth and fourth centuries BCE. The terms inside the brackets are in Sanskrit.

[58] Staal 1996, 121–122. The same ideal is also found in the teachings of the Bhagavad Gītā.

Discussing the questions of under what condition and to what extent gift-giving in India is interested or disinterested depends a great deal on the context in which the questions are posed and on the source the argumentation relies on. Anthropologists and sociologists generally have considered the notion of the pure or disinterested gift as a mere ideal, the opposite to a market commodity, and they have been more interested in the communal significance of gift-giving.[59] Irrespective of the difference in standpoints, there is mutual understanding concerning one aspect of the gift peculiar to the Indian culture according to which each deed – also gift-giving – is thought to have a consequence which is reaped in the next life. Thus, even the denial of earthly reciprocity of the gift, as Trautmann emphasizes, does not exclude the possibility that the gift-giving contains an element of self-interest. Even if the gifts are not given for the sake of this-worldly purposes, they may be given in order to yield spiritual merit: The *dāna* given in this life is thought to be repaid in the afterlife.[60] This afterlife dimension – elementary for Hindu thinking – can be taken as disproving, or at least weakening, the idea of the disinterested gift. Some comments of my interviewees – on reasoning about the use of pilgrimages, for example – indicated that the next life aspect had an influence on them, although this-worldly goals were unquestionably the main motives underlying their gift-giving.

In some recent anthropological studies on the South Asian gift, which represent a reversal of the *dāna* theory maintained by Heim, the focus has been on the aspect of transference involved in gift-giving. Jonathan Parry and Gloria Goodwin Raheja, in studying different gift-giving communities, conclude that the essential aspect of gift-giving is in conveying the impurity or inauspiciousness to a worthy recipient – in their cases to Brahman priests. Raheja, in carrying out her fieldwork in the North Indian village of Pahansu, found that the villagers thought that the gift "when given in the proper ritual contexts and to the appropriate recipients, transfers inauspiciousness and brings about the auspiciousness, well-being, and protection of the person, the family, the house, and the village" (Raheja 1988, xii). Those giving the gifts were able to palm

[59] The opposition and distinction between the gift and commodity exchange has been studied by Chris Gregory (1982, 2005) and Mark Osteen (2002), to name but a few scholars. In anthropological and sociological studies on India, gift-giving and reciprocity have been studied, for example, in the context of Indian Hindu marriage, in which the two major elements are the gift of a virgin (*sampradāna*) or gift of a daughter (*kanyādāna*), and the payment of a dowry (*paṇa*) (see, for example, Fruzzetti, 1982; Östör & Fruzzetti & Barnett, 1992). In various studies the gift exchange is approached in the context of the *jajmani* system, which refers to a socio-economic institution of the pre-industrial self-subsistent village economy. The *jajmani* institution is based on the idea that the village people themselves produce the services and most of the necessities of life within the limits of caste and occupation, and then exchange their respective products between themselves under a customary system of trading and swapping. This system has been generally thought to have two institutional connotations – religious and economic: Religiously, a *jajman* is one who employs a Brahman for the performance of any solemn or religious ceremony. This arrangement makes the Brahman dependent for subsistence on the *jajmans* who are his clients. Similarly, the food-producing peasants play pivotal role in the system as the artisans, weavers, boatmen, barbers, cleaners and doctors, among others, supply their products and services to peasant families in return for some share in their harvest. The peasants, like the religious *jajmans* who feed the Brahman, are the *jajmans* feeding the villagers in return for their services and products. On *jajmani* system, see, for example, Banglapedia; Wiser 1988.

[60] Trautmann 1981, 279–282. However, the afterlife dimension does not categorically nullify the pure gift option. For example, there are certainly learned devoted Hindus who follow the scriptural ideals and believe that one ought not consider or strive for the afterlife fruit at all; instead, one should do what is right.

off their inauspiciousness along with a gift, whereas the recipients of the gifts were seen as the receptacles for the givers' inauspiciousness, and thus ranked lower in status than the donors.[61] Raheja unexpectedly discovered that gift-giving was "far more important than hierarchical considerations in structuring inter-caste and kinship relation[s] within the village" and that the dominant caste – which was not Brahman but Gujar – was defined by their status as gift-givers, who never accepted gifts from others (Raheja 1988, xii).

For Parry, the opposition of giving and receiving rests not on auspiciousness and inauspiciousness, as it does for Raheja, but on the dichotomy of purity and impurity. Based on his fieldwork on Brahman priests performing death rites in Benares, Parry argues that in accepting the *dāna* that the priests cannot or have no intention to 'digest', they also accept the sin and its terrible consequences.[62] For them, "the gift embodies evil and represents a peril, and the reason for this is that it is held to embody and transmit the sins of the donor to the priestly recipient, who is likened to a sewer through which the moral filth of his patrons is passed" (Parry 1986, 460; Parry 1989, 68). In Parry's work the polluting and immoral attributes flow with the gift from givers to Brahman recipients, who are likened to vessels and repositories of the sins – a fact which obviously puts them in a vague position in their own eyes as well as in relation to other groups of people.

For Raheja, the transference is not an act working only one way. Instead, she suggests that in transferring inauspiciousness gifts also bring about auspiciousness in return. Thus, the gifts essentially are reciprocated. In the communities involved in my study, women made *pūjā* and offered gifts to the gods in order to transfer inauspiciousness – to get rid of bad influences, to get cured from sickness, and to remove infertility and other misfortunes that people faced in their lives. In exchange, they hoped for auspiciousness – healing, well-being, protection, and all kinds of material good. According to my interviewees, those gifts given in hope of removing inauspiciousness were not thought of as putting the recipient in an inferior position. Thus, the gods were not considered as being vessels of human sins similarly to the Brahmans in the studies of Raheja and Parry.

## 2.5 Reciprocated gift

After this brief exploration of gift theories and South Asian conceptions of the gift I will now move on to expand on the different types of gifts, and to discuss my interviewees' ideas of gift-

[61] Raheja's conclusions challenge the Dharmaśāstra *dāna* theory but concur with, for example, the anthropologist Marriot, who has claimed that the giver in Indian society is always regarded as superior in rank to the receiver, on condition that the gift is not reciprocated (see Marriot 1976, 112).

[62] According to Parry, if it was an ideal world, the priest "would be able to 'digest' the *dāna* and evacuate the sin by dint of an extraordinary ritual fastidiousness involving the daily repetition of *mantras* and the performance of elaborate rituals of expiation, and, above all, by giving away with increment all that he has taken in *dāna.* In the real world, however, all this is regarded as a sheer impossibility", and "most priests frankly admit that they are ignorant of the correct ritual procedures, and would have neither the time nor the resources to get through them all even if they were not" (Parry 1989, 68).

giving. While Heim sets the main focus of her study on the ideals of the disinterested gift, she also identifies a range of other gifts introduced by Dharmaśāstra treatises. Those include gifts of public and social good, gift of land, gift of learning, gift of fearlessness, some of them stretching the concept of *dāna* to reach way beyond the ritualistic and formalized gift-giving procedure.[63] Heim also distinguishes "a class of gifts that are closely related to worship (*pūjā*) and vows (*vrata*)" (Heim 2004, 126).[64] For example, giving gifts at holy places such as sacred rivers and mountains, and making vows to give gifts for a certain period of time are types of *dāna*. In Heim's account *pūjā* involving gifts for gods stands in a somewhat ambiguous position in relation to *dāna. Pūjā*, according to Heim, resonates the ideas of *dāna* in the sense that the emphasis is "on gifts flowing to superiors out of feeling of regard" (Heim 2004, 126). However, *pūjā* diverges from the *dāna* ideals, as the gifts to gods "are made out of desires to gain merit and worldly benefits and to ward off evils" (Heim 2004, 126). Thus, Heim suggests that gifts to gods, though given out of respect, are usually interested and distinct from *dāna* – at least from the ideal *dāna*.

*Dāna* ideals, as I have already brought up, although essential in understanding the Indian ethos, do not communicate with the principles of gift-giving held by the women interviewed for this study. The gift-giving of these women, more in accordance with the views of Mauss, was motivated by, and usually heavy with the hope of reciprocation. The word *dāna* – written the same way also in Bengali – was used to refer to quite the opposite of the *dāna* ideals. In women's discourse, the *dāna* was a gift given to god or to a Brahman priest who received the gift in a temple or shrine.[65] However, *dāna* did not refer to food gifts for the deities, which were usually known as *bhoga.* Neither was it equated to *upacāra,* offerings and articles required in worship. Nor was *dāna* a *bali*, which meant an offering or sacrifice, particularly a blood sacrifice for carnivorous deities. Instead, *dāna* usually meant a special gift, such as a precious article or money given in hope of the deity fulfilling a specific request or after the request was fulfilled. It was occasionally used as a close equal to price or payment. The connotations my interviewees bestowed on the term *dāna* differed a great deal from the ideal of a disinterested gift; yet, their views supposedly echo the gift-giving conceptions of at least certain groups in contemporary Indian society.

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[63] See Heim 2004, 120–125. In Krishan Lal Khera's *Index to History of Dharmaśāstra* there is a list of different gifts which are mentioned in Dharmaśāstra treatises. Most gifts are recommended to be given in order to purify and free oneself from sinful acts and to compensate for sin (*pāpa*) (Khera 1997, 43–44). The gift as a compensation for some wrongdoing is closely connected to *prāyaścitta,* which means penance performed for washing off a certain sin. The Dharmaśāstra texts mention a great number of *prāyaścitta* which are required for various offences. These include, for example, *prāyaścitta* for Vedic students sleeping after sunrise, for someone eating food with hair in it, for someone touching garlic, for someone killing a woman (Banerji 1999, 90; Khera 1997, 79–90).

[64] Sanskrit *vrata* equals to *brata* in Bengali.

[65] Another Bengali term for gift is *upahāra*, which usually means any material gift given as a present outside the ritual context. However, the dictionary also gives *upahāra* translations such as 'complimentary gift' and 'offering'. Important terms related to the gift in the ritual context are also *pāonā* and *paṇa. Pāonā* means the 'claim' and 'acquisition of gifts', 'that which ought to be paid for one', whereas *paṇa* can be translated as 'promise', 'price' and 'dowry' (Kutir 2007, 163, 450, 544, and 565).

The reciprocity, in fact, is an essential feature of particularly the Śākta branch of the Hindu tradition that reveres the Great Goddess and her various forms as the supreme deity. In her account on goddess theology Rita DasGupta Sherma states: "Shaktism functions in terms of what I would call a *theology of reciprocity* which revolves around a reciprocal relationship between worship[p]er and Deity" (Sherma 2002, 48). The reciprocity, according to Sherma, materializes in "the procurement of various articles necessary for the ritual invocation of the Goddess, the endowment of gifts for the use of her priest(s), and the provision of necessary funds for the proper enactment of her rituals", which "are expected to please the Goddess and elicit general blessings, or specific boons" (Sherma 2002, 48).[66] Sherma's view does not leave much space for the idea of pure and disinterested gift. Instead, the gifts for goddess, according to her, are investments which are expected to generate profit. The worshipper aims at influencing the deity by appealing to her with her favourite gifts, an effort which is then rewarded with the return gifts.

Based on the research material, I suggest that the women's ritual conduct was essentially target-oriented and resonated Mauss' conception of a motivated gift. Regardless of the apparent devotional tone, the women were conscious of those – often material – objectives and goals they were aiming at through their ritual behaviour. While most rituals were thought to maintain the general well-being of the family and bring them spiritual merit, there was also ritual behaviour that had a more specific orientation. The booklets on women's ritual stories (*Meyedera Bratakathā*) assume that the ritual behaviour is intentional and motivated. At the end of each ritual story there is a mention about the ritual fruit (*brataphala*) that is to be reaped as a consequence of performing the ritual. The ritual fruit involves general blessings but also concrete – even material – rewards. For example, the performance of Aśok Ṣaṣṭhi brata is believed to prevent the disunion of men and women, and to keep children away from grief and sorrow.[67] While each ritual is thought to have the potential to bear a ritual fruit it does not happen automatically: It is generally thought that the ritual has to be conducted in a proper manner, with particular ritual materials (*upacāra*) and by obeying the rules of right conduct (*niyama*).[68]

## 2.6 Gift-giving and exchange in the ritual context

### Material gifts

Gift-giving in the context of the Hindu ritual is explained and rationalized in various ways: gifts are thought to compensate for a human debt to the gods; to purify the devotee from sins; to influ-

[66] It is worth noting that the other branch of Hindu tradition, particularly that emphasizing the priority of the teachings of the *Bhagavad Gītā* has drawn quite different conclusions as regards gift-giving and expectations of reciprocity. In the *Bhagavad Gītā* Śrī Kṛṣṇa advocates as the uppermost goal of life a mode of activity in which the acts (rituals) should be continued to be performed as usual, but the fruits of action should be renounced (see, for example, Staal 1996, 122, 133).

[67] Bhattāchārya, P. G., 174; Bhattāchārya, S. H., 147; Kabiratno, 133.

[68] Another Bengali term for ritual rules is *bidhāna,* which is usually translated as 'scriptural prescript' or 'ruling' (Biswas 2000).

ence the gods to share the goods that they possess and to contribute to the course of events. In addition, devotees give gifts in order to serve, please, and entertain the deity. In spite of the importance of the material aspect of gift-giving in the ritual, it is important to note that the ritual gift and the exchange between the devotee and deity involve both a material and an immaterial dimension. In what follows, I will discuss the material and immaterial gifts and the reciprocity that takes place in the course of ritual conduct.

One of the most common forms of Hindu ritual is the worship service in sixteen steps (Ṣoḍaśa-upacāra pūjā), which in slightly different variations are performed in reverence to diverse Hindu divinities.[69] The sixteen steps can be understood as sixteen offerings or gifts given to the deity. Depending on the textual tradition that the ritual sequence is based on, the number and arrangement of the offerings vary slightly; for example, tantric ritual, in its entirety, is thought to consist of twenty-one offerings (*upacāra*).[70] Despite the variance in the number of offerings the procedure is virtually identical and resembles the treatment of an honored guest: the divinity is invoked, welcomed, seated, washed, fed, clothed, decorated, entertained, and finally waved goodbye.[71] In her account of the structure of the Hindu ritual, Lina Gupta argues that the service analogy of the Hindu ritual reflects the reciprocal structure that exists between the devotee and deity. Entertaining and serving the god is repaid with the offering of blessing by the divine to the human.[72] Among my interviewees, the assortment of offerings differed a great deal from one ritual to the other since each deity and type of ritual was thought to demand precise offerings. In regular domestic worship the number of offerings were fewer. At most homes of the three studied communities, the deities of the house were daily offered at least sacred water, incense, flowers, and some food items.

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[69] See, for example, Tachikawa et al. 2001, 105, 109–110.

[70] The twenty-one offerings (*upacāra*) – an expanded version of the standard list of sixteen – are 1) invocation (*āvāhana*); 2) welcome (*svāgata*); 3) seat for the image (*āsana*); 4) seating (*sthāpana*); 5) water for washing the feet (*pādya*); 6) offering of unboiled rice, flowers, sandal paste, etc. (*arghya*); 7) water for bathing (*snāna*); 8) cloths (*vastra*); 9) sacred thread (*upavīta*); 10) ornaments (*bhūṣaṇa*); 11) fragrance, sandal paste (*gandha*); 12) flowers (*puṣpa*); 13) incense (*dhūpa*); 14) light (*dīpa*); 15) food (*naivedya*); 16) water for sipping (*ācamana*); 17) betel leaves (*tāmbūla*); 18) garlands (*mālya*); 19) waving lights before the image (*āratī*); 20) prayer (*namaskāra*); and 21) asking the deity to retire (*visarjana*). The terms in the brackets are in Sanskrit (Grimes 1996, 328; Tachikawa et al. 2001, 109).

[71] See, for example, Bowker 1997, 774; Flood 1996, 103, 208; Fuller 1992, 57; Östör 1997, 176.

[72] Gupta 1997, 92–94. Gupta, while discussing the Hindu ritual as analogous to the treatment of a guest, names four basic components of Hindu worship, namely 1) participants, 2) preparations, 3) process, and 4) promise. As regards participants, the devotee (*bhakta*) assumes the role of an entertainer who serves and entertains his divine audience (*Bhagavān*). The roles, according to Gupta, can also be reversed. Preparation for the ritual requires inner and outer purity of the devotee. In all rituals, cleansing of the mind with the attitude of sincerity, sacrifice, and discipline is as essential as the actual cleansing of the physical body. Outer preparations involve correct timing, decoration of the worship ground, and gathering of the materials necessary for ritual conduct. The actual process of the ritual includes different forms of prayer, chanting, singing, giving offerings, meditating, and displaying hand gestures (*mudrā*). It is commonly believed that the efficacy of a ritual is partly dependent upon the appropriate worship activity. According to Gupta, all Hindu rituals exemplify fulfilment of a promise made and carried out by the devotee. It is assumed that the promise will be reciprocated by the divine. The first three components, participants, preparation and process, comprise the gifts of devotee to deity, and the fourth component, promise, stands for the return gift from deity to devotee.

Most *pūjā* in the Hindu context are thought to require some food items: fruit, sweets, pulses, rice, milk-products, or even a complete meal with varied preparations.[73] Deities are served with both vegetarian and non-vegetarian offerings depending on the taste and liking of the deity. Some deities are believed to be satisfied and tamed only by a blood-offering (*bali*).[74] Individuals and communities sacrifice animals at various occasions such as in celebrating a particular *pūjā* or in fulfilling personal promises (*mānasika*).[75] Sacrificial gifts indicate the wealth and status of a family and community. The main sacrificial animals among the communities studied were fowl, goats, and pigs.

Giving of a food offering is one concrete example of the gift exchange that takes place in the course of a ritual performance. The procedure of the exchange is as follows: The worshipper prepares and gives the food offering to the deity – preferably food that pleases the deity. The edible gifts are placed at the foot of the manifestation of the deity, and it is believed that the deity tastes a bit of the food (*bhoga*). As a result, the substances are believed to be imbued with divine power and grace. After consuming and enjoying the gifts, the deity 'gives' the leftovers (*juṭā*) back to the devotee. This return gift, the divinely invested substance, is called *prasāda*. *Prasāda* is usually understood to be a material symbol of the deity's grace and power which is given to the devotee. The distribution of *prasāda* at the conclusion of the ritual thus confirms the reciprocal relationship of the devotee and deity.[76]

### Immaterial gifts

Besides material gifts, several immaterial elements in the Hindu ritual express the gift exchange and interplay between the devotee and deity. The most basic communication between devotee and deity is the exchange of greeting gestures, a conspicuous element of every ritual. Devotees salute the deity (*pranāma*) in front of the manifestation by bowing their heads slightly forward

[73] Among the common food offerings are five items from a cow (*pañcagabya*) and the mixture of five nectars (*pañcamṛta*). The five items from a cow (*pañcagabya*); milk, yoghurt, clarified butter, cow dung, and urine are recommended by, for example, Dharmaśāstras, Manu, and other law books, to be offered as part of the rituals that are performed for purification and expiation of sins (see, for example, Abbott 2000, 413; Jha 2004, 131). The mixture of five nectars (*pañcamṛta*); sugar, honey, yoghurt, clarified butter and milk is often offered to the deity – usually Śiva – in rituals that involve pouring the liquid on the deity's effigy or symbol (see, for example, Nicholas 2008, 18).

[74] In present day West Bengal, animal slaughter for sacrificial purpose is still a widespread practice both in villages and urban areas. In each of the three communities studied, animal sacrifice was carried out during special occasions. Several interviewees mentioned the practice of goat sacrifice (*pāṅṭhā bali*). During the fieldwork I witnessed the sacrifice of chickens, goats, and pigs. Nowadays it is also popular to substitute an animal with a vegetable or tree. The most common substitutes are pumpkins (*kumṛā bali*) and plantain trees (*kalā gāch bali*).

[75] In West Bengal the major religious feast of Śākta Hindus is the ten-day autumn festival of Dūrgāpūjā, which celebrates the victory of the goddess Dūrgā over the buffalo demon Mahiṣāsur. Traditionally this was a time for a buffalo sacrifice. Since 1947 the Indian government has limited buffalo sacrifice, and sacrificial animals have been replaced by substitute vegetables (Rodrigues 2003, 7–12; Östör 1997, 182–183).

[76] Fuller 1992, 74–75. Receiving the gift of *prasāda* is also an act that carries an important social meaning. The sharing of *prasāda* makes a symbolic statement about the linkage between the participants of a ritual (see, for example, Babb 1975, 54–55, 58).

and bringing both hands together at the elevation of the face. In exchange for the salute, the deity is thought to give the devotee the offering of a blessing (*āśīrbāda*). In order to entertain and influence the deity, devotees use sacred verses and syllables (*mantra*) and hand gestures (*mudrā*).[77] Sacred verses and hand signs are not only audible and visible tools which bring the spiritual reality of the deity into being; they are also believed to be sacred as such, capable of generating power (*śakti*). This power can then be directed to desired ends. For example, some of the women interviewed told that they had experienced relief from body pain due to the repetition of sacred verses (*mantra*).

Immaterial exchange can also be realized visually. For the interviewees, one of the most essential purposes for visiting temples and shrines was to see a visual image of the deity (to have a *darśana*). Through *darśana* – viewing the god in a manifest form – the devotee is thought to participate in the power of the deity. *Darśana* brings good fortune, well-being, grace, and spiritual merit. *Darśana* is not, however, a passive one-sided act of the worshipper, but a reciprocal event: In the exchange of visions, not only does the devotee see the deity, but the deity is also thought to see the devotee. When the devotee is looked at by the image, she or he is believed to absorb the power of the deity.[78] *Darśana* is possible also through a person who is possessed by a deity.[79]

Ritual communication between the deity and devotee is enacted also through the drawing of sacred geometrical designs (*yantra*), a common practice of, for example, women observing vows (*brata*).[80] By drawing the design – and usually with the aid of a certain *mantra* – the deity is invoked into the *yantra* either for a certain period of time or for more long-lasting use. The *yantra* actualizes the deity, who is then bestowed with power, and protective, magical functions.[81] The reciprocity between the devotee and *yantra* is believed to come to fruition in the same manner as with other visible manifestations of the deities.

An immaterial gift from a devotee to a divinity may also be a mental state, decision, or conviction that is presented through specific practice. The ritual behaviour of the women studied con-

[77]The term *mantra* refers to 'a verse', 'syllable', 'sentence', or 'phrase' that is believed to be of divine origin. It is recited or chanted in a ritual or meditative context. *Mantras* are used to evoke deities, for protection, and to magically affect the world. In some tantric traditions they are themselves regarded as deities, or embodying the power or energy of a deity. A *mantra* is given to a person orally by a guru or teacher, who empowers the *mantra.* A *mudrā* means a gesture – a sacred figure shown by the hands – similar in efficacy and nature to a *mantra.* A *mudrā* always represents something on the worshipper's behalf (Flood 1996, 221–222; Östör 1997, 183–184).

[78] Eck 1981, 6; Erndl 1987, 76–77; Flood 1996, 220; Fuller 1992, 59–60; Kinsley 2003, 115; McDaniel 1989, 3; Rodrigues 2003, 295–296. In his account of Hindu ritual, C.J. Fuller explains that when the flame of a lamp is lit at the fire ritual (*ārti*), ending the performance of most *pūjā*, the divine and human participants are most fully identified in their common vision of the flame. In their mutual vision of each other, they receive the perfect *darśana*. It is believed that a deity's power and benevolent, protective grace are transmitted through the flame to the worshipper (Fuller 1992, 73).

[79] Erndl 1987, 222; Erndl 1997, 24–26; Kapadia 1996, 126; McDaniel 1989, 17–19, 233–234.

[80] In the Bengal region these designs – which are influenced by *yantra* patterns – are called *ālpanā* (Basak 2006, 39–41; Bühnemann 2007, 1).

[81] Bühnemann 2007, 18, 31–32.

sisted essentially of immaterial gifts of vows (*brata*), resolves, and promises (*mānasika*) that were made in the hope of reaching the desired aim. These vows and promises usually involved a period of abstinence from food, intercourse, or interaction with others. Devotees offered the deity not only material gifts but also physical suffering and pain which resulted from the dedication and loyalty of the devotee towards the god.

This chapter has discussed various aspects of gift-giving, reciprocity of the gift, and gifts in the context of the Hindu ritual. What exactly those gifts were that women offered to the gods, what it was that they hoped for and expected in return, and how the exchange actually unfolded, are the questions that will be explored in Chapter 5.

# 3 Fieldwork in three Kolkata neighbourhoods: phases of the ethnographic process

## 3.1 Identifying the preconditions of the research and the pre-understanding of the researcher

As stated above, the ethnographic material for this study was collected in the urban neighbourhoods of Kolkata during three fieldwork periods between 2002 and 2008.[82] During the preliminary fieldwork trip in 2002 I was introduced to a range of low caste communities and made arrangements for the forthcoming research phase. The main part of the fieldwork concentrating on the three selected neighbourhoods was conducted in 2003-2004. In the final stage in 2008, the fieldwork was completed with a check-up field visit during which it was possible to fill some information gaps and run focused interviews on specific topics to test the research results.

In the introductory chapter I identified the essential starting points of my ethnographic approach. In line with the views of three influential scholars, the main objectives of my ethnographic research are: to capture the authentic voices of the informants (*emics*) and analyse their voices by means of theoretical concepts and categories (*etics*) integral to this study (Pike); to know and "thickly" describe the context of the study (Geerz); and to understand the historically conditioned situation and pre-understanding that necessarily influence an interpretation of the research material (Gadamer). These starting points serve as important guidelines and ideals contributing to the ethnographic process, which will be now explained in detail step by step.[83]

In the fieldwork areas, I used the qualitative methods of ethnographic recording, primarily participant observation and both structured and unstructured interviews.[84] The central challenge as a fieldworker was to do away with my preconceptions of how low caste women are positioned and labelled in the Indian society, and to make the interviewees question their preconceptions of a white western woman with a background in charity work. I had to start with questioning the way 'the Other' – the informants, the objects of the study – is constructed, and what my position is in relation to 'them'.[85] I had to bring into queston the conventional view according to which the westerner brings civilization and empowerment to the uncivilized and poor; instead, the interviewees had to be convinced that they were to civilize me about their tradition, customs and cul-

[82] This research process is a continuation of my fieldwork in 1998, which was carried out among the low caste women in the villages surrounding the city of Chennai in Tamil Nadu.

[83] The phases of the ethnographic process have been discussed, for example, by Denzin & Lincoln 2008, 28–35.

[84] In recent methodological literature, qualitative research in the form of participant observation, interviewing and ethnography has been subjected to considerable criticism. The way the research has often been carried out in the past and even the present is seen as the continuation of imperialism and colonialism: the white man governing the indigenous people by telling the West the truth about them (Denzin & Lincoln 2008, 1).

[85] Qualitative research has also been criticized for treating the indigenous people as 'the Other', namely the dark-skinned Other, which is represented to the white world through ethnographic reports. To put it another way, ethnographic reports have been considered as part of the colonizing strategies, the "ways of controlling the foreign, deviant, and troublesome Other" (Denzin &Lincoln 2008, 1–2; Denzin 2005, 935).

ture. I had to become a person to whom they would want to teach their beliefs and practices.[86] According to Indian sociologist M.N. Srinivas, there is still a strong belief in postcolonial societies that only educated men and women – especially white-skinned westerners – are knowledgeable enough to teach illiterate, poor and superstitious native people.[87] This preconception applies especially to the lowest strata of the society, since they are often put into inferior positions by being targets of the various charity initiatives operated by international organizations.

## 3.2 Cooperation with the Lutheran World Service India (LWSI)

In the initial stage of the research process I had to find a field and people who matched my research interests. Considering that there was not a boundless amount of time to spend on getting acquainted with the spectrum of potential research fields, I decided to operate through a non-governmental organization (NGO), Lutheran World Service India (LWSI), which, among a number of other activities runs an urban development project in Kolkata. Access to LWSI was not difficuolt, since they collaborate and draw funding from Finn Church Aid (FCA), an organization I had a long-standing relationship with. FCA supported my research project and requested LWSI to collaborate with me. LWSI received me warm-heartedly and we agreed that my research was of mutual interest and served the development initiatives of the NGO by producing detailed information about the customs and traditions of childbirth and mothering in their project areas. During the fieldwork I was to have their full support. Julianne Cheek argues that "any form of support for qualitative research will have its unique demands on both the researcher and the research project" (Cheek 2005, 387). According to her view, there is no denying that support will restrict the freedom of the researcher in terms of both project design and the form that the products of the research take.[88] From the very beginning of my field experience I recognized the impact of the NGO association on this study, a fact that I have to consider in evaluating the research data.

LWSI provided me with substantial background information and a general overview of the field to be examined. This arrangement made many things easy, but obviously brought some challenges to the fieldwork as well. Initially, there was apparent confusion as regards my role in relation to the studied communities. The people were told that I had come to do research and learn from them, but since I moved around with LWSI community organizers, I was associated with them. I inadvertently became identified as a representative of a NGO, a presupposition, which was never completely clarified. People in the potential research communities first thought I was a journalist or one of the foreign visitors who kept visiting the LWSI project sites in order to report to the foreign sponsors.

[86] Spradley 1980, 4.

[87] Srinivas 1996, 209.

[88] Cheek 2005, 387.

Without a doubt, this initial arrangement had an impact on the fieldwork and the relationship between the researcher and the people to be studied. It is, therefore, necessary to examine my position and role as a researcher in the field and in relation to the NGO, as well as the possible consequences on the research data. Robert Burgess suggests three different models for a field researcher. The most common is the "going native" model, in which a researcher enters the field and learns to behave as the subjects being studied.[89] A researcher may also take the position of "an undercover agent", who observes the subjects without necessarily revealing her research intentions. The third role – which is also referred to as an empathetic approach – is to advocate for the research community, to intervene in social situations and try to improve the status and conditions of the people who are being studied.[90] A field researcher may also approach the subjects by establishing a membership role among them.[91]

As a representative of a NGO, the research communities considered me as one of those 'charitable nice guys', who want to push them towards the better life.[92] Kolkata is full of them. Richard G. Mitchell has given this role of a researcher the term naive sympathizer.[93] Whatever the name of the role, it helped me to be accepted in the community and most people approached the 'foreign invader' in a friendly manner. Many seemed to believe that I had come to investigate whether the development initiatives of the NGO had been fruitful. In the beginning this put me in an awkward position. If I asked questions, people wanted to give 'correct answers' according to what had been taught to them instead of telling me how things really were. For example, when they were asked what people would do if they had problems during pregnancy, the orthodox answer was that they would visit a doctor. In practice (as I later learned) most families turned first to their protector deities and traditional curing methods such as exorcism and amulets. They wanted to show that they were advanced and modern, because this is what they thought wanted to be heard and was something we had in common. It took some time to build a relationship with

[89] In recent methodological literature, the "going native" model has been regarded as problematic for various reasons. If a researcher becomes too involved in a group, she may set aside and forget the research project. The close alliance with the group may also be dangerous for the analytic integrity of the study. If going native happens in the context of a religious sect or any ideological group, the objectivity of the research is likely to suffer (Warren & Karner 2010, 97).

[90] Burgess 1993, 20; Fontana & Frey 2008, 117. The kind of social research which aims at developing and improving the conditions of the communities is usually referred to as participatory research or critical action research. Both orientate towards community action and are committed to social, economic, and political development responsive to the needs and opinions of 'ordinary people' (Kemmis & McTaggart 2005, 560–561).

[91] The researcher may pursue several types of membership roles. A shared "master status" such as shared race, gender, class, ethnicity or social class can entitle the researcher to membership. It can also be granted to a researcher through conversion, or through shared sub-cultural, recreational, political or occupational status (Warren & Karner 2010, 105).

[92] Warren & Karner point out that it is not only the researcher who selects a role that she/he wishes to enact. The study subjects can also agree on a role for the researcher. The three common roles, according to Warren & Karner, are mascot, apprentice, and dancing daughter. A mascot is someone nice to have around, but not taken too seriously, which is usually due to one's sex or age. An apprentice is someone wanting to learn from the masters. A dancing daughter is like a mascot, associated with women rather than men, and represents a strategy of women researchers in a field of men. The dancing daughter, according to Warren & Karner, "dances to attract her field father's eye and keep it paternally (not sexually) on her" (Warren & Karner 2010, 88–89).

[93] Mitchell 1993, 14.

the interviewees in which they were confident enough to elaborate the traditional beliefs, customs and practices which they still held.

I was given the role of an advocate, but my aim was "to go native". In getting acquainted with the research communities I tried to bring up issues and experiences that we shared, things that women could relate to and find familiar.[94] The fact that I was a married woman with a family made me a respectable woman and always gave us something to talk about. My husband and stepchildren occasionally accompanied me to the research sites, and people were interested and delighted to meet a foreign family. My husband built friendly relationship, especially with the male members of the communities, which also broke barriers between me and the field. But the real ice-breakers were my stepdaughters, who – dressed in local clothes – convinced people that we respected their culture and wanted to teach their way of life to our children. I always wore inexpensive local dresses, which helped me to fit into the group. Sharing motherhood was the single most important factor which helped me to easily enter into the conversation on any family-related topic and mothering issue. The second most crucial factor contributing to the fieldwork was a common language. Learning Bengali was worth the effort and provided me with direct contact with the people. As we got used to each other, most of the women were willing to share very personal and sensitive issues about their lives. This required sharing emotions, which would have been very difficult through an interpreter. I also think that there was some advantage to being an outsider from another cultural background. The women knew that I was not bound to their conventions and traditions. Thus, they did not have to convince me of their chastity, and they could openly tell me if their ideas collided with conventional thinking. As will be later elaborated in detail, low castes in general hold more liberal views and are prone to challenge the traditional moral codes of Indian society. The women knew that in similar fashion Westerners maintained more liberal views on many aspects, and this conviction, in my opinion, resulted in a relaxed atmosphere between us.

While trying "to be native" I did not totally give up the advocate role either. I participated in a number of community meetings and happenings organized by LWSI and the neighbourhood. These events thought me a great deal about the dynamics of the community and the everyday concerns and challenges of its members. I took an openly positive stand towards the development initiatives implemented by LWSI and encouraged people to join the common endeavours. The numerous discussions with the LWSI community organizers responsible for the project areas provided me not only with useful information but introduced me to key persons in the neighbourhoods. This helped me in assimilating into the community. Community development was in a way our common mission, yet in between I ran my own study. I was not just hanging around, so to speak, asking insignificant questions, but I was there for the sake of the community. The

[94] Several researchers have emphasized the importance of removing the barriers between the interviewer and interviewee. In the process of interviewing women especially, many female researchers have advocated "a partnership between the researcher and respondents", who then "work together to create a narrative – the interview" (Fontana & Frey 2008, 117). Feminist researchers have also been concerned about hierarchical and power relations that necessarily influence the research (see, for example, Douset & Mauthner 2008, 332–336).

fieldwork met hardly any resistance; on the contrary, most people were voluntarily co-operative throughout my study.

### 3.3 Entrance: recording observations in the fieldwork diary

The actual fieldwork began with the selection of the field sites. I visited roughly fifteen neighbourhoods – all LWSI project areas – which fitted the definition of low caste community. Of them I selected three neighbourhoods, which differed from one another in many aspects, and thus were likely to represent a wide enough sample. They were located both in the heart of the city and in the outskirts of great Kolkata, and represented the Bengali, Oriyan and Bihari traditions. These neighbourhoods contained a homogenous as well as a heterogenous community, the first generation immigrant community, and a community which had absorbed the influences of the surrounding society and started to shift away from the customs of their origin. One community was extremely patriarchal, while in one community women played the most important roles in all common endeavours. Each of these three communities responded well to my overtures and no-one wanted to prevent me from entering the neighbourhoods to run the research.

The LWSI community organizers had taken the trouble to build a confidential relationship with the people over the years, which helped me a great deal at the beginning of my study, and saved me considersable time. In fieldwork terminology the LWSI staff would be called "gatekeepers", key persons who granted me initial access to the research setting.[95] The disadvantage was that the communities were not 'untouched'; development work had apparently started to shift the focus of the people into directions which originally were not there. Thus, my challenge was to differentiate between recent phenomena and those of a more longstanding nature, and between what community members were taught and what they really thought, believed and practised. Involvement in the development scheme had introduced people to a new genre of talking, which they had accepted and begun to apply. They kept repeating phrases which they thought were the correct way to talk.

When I entered the research sites, I immediately informed as many community members as possible about my plans to regularly visit their neighbourhood, participate in their meetings and festivities, and mingle with the people. I told them that I was writing a book which would tell about their lives and customs. Obviously people wandered what there was to write. After explaining that the customs of my country were different from theirs, and that the people of my country were interested in learning about different lifestyles, they usually agreed to cooperate. From then on they often came to say: "you can write in your book that …". The exact topic of my research interest was not revealed at once since I did not want to exclude anyone at first hand, but it soon became obvious that I was concentrating on issues related to women and their religious practices.

[95] See, for example, Warren &Karner 2010, 74–75.

The field study started with unfocused observations and casual socializing with the members of the research communities. In order to form a general impression of the neighbourhoods and the people, I entered all the basic facts such as names, relationships, occupations, educational standard in the fieldwork diary. I also gave an assignment to some youngsters in each of the three communities to draw a map of their locality. The charts helped me a great deal to work out the composition of the neighbourhoods, and clarified who and which places were considered to be part of the communities. There were no clear external marks indicating the borderlines of the communities. In the beginning the maps were of great help in determining the co-ordinates of the field: Who lived in which corner of the neighbourhood, and what people did in these places. For example, at certain time of day I could be sure to meet some people by the water sources, where women regularly came to collect water. By observing them I gradually worked out the average daily and weekly routines and schedules of several women. It occurred to me that their daily and weekly rhythms were framed by religious duties, providing for food, taking care of the household chores, and working outside the home.

Observational research methods involve three distinct levels of observations: descriptive, focused, and selective.[96] The fieldwork begins with descriptive observations during which the researcher explores the field with no particular questions in mind, the aim being to get as wide an overview of the field as possible. The descriptive data lays the foundation for further focused observations, and enables the researcher to begin with the preliminary ethnographic analysis. In making focused observations the researcher looks only at material that is relevant to the issue at hand, in my case women's ritual conduct. Selective observations focus on a specific form (in my case mothering rituals) of a more general category (ritual).[97]

As the fieldwork progressed, it focused on women's religious activities and practices, as well as on behaviour patterns concerning mothering and childbirth. While observing women performing a variety of rituals and celebrating religious feasts, I gradually developed an undersanding of the logic and motives behind the gift-giving and gift exchange practices that took place in the ritual context. People started to invite me to join in their religious ceremonies and special occasions. They wanted to give me an active role in their functions and I often ended up both observing and participating in a ceremony.[98] These involved family occasions, community occasions, and the whole surrounding locality. At some feasts women played central roles, while in others they held back and left the stage to the men and professional priests. I realized that women's role and posi-

[96] See, for example, Angrosino 2008, 166; Spradley 1980, 33.

[97] Angrosino 2008, 166.

[98] The different methods of participant observation vary according to the stance the researcher takes in relation to the people studied. In Burgess's construct, the four models of participant observation are 1) to fully participate; 2) to observe while participating; 3) to participate while observing; and, 4) to fully observe (Burgess 1995, 45–46; 1993, 80). According to Angrosino, observation-based research has been conducted by most social scientists in three ways: 1) participant observation, grounded in the establishment of rapport between the researcher and the host community and requiring the long-term immersion of the researcher in the everyday life of that community; 2) reactive observation, associated with controlled settings and based on the assumption that the people being studied are aware of being observed and are amenable to interacting with the researcher only in response to elements in the research design; and 3) unobtrusive observation, conducted with people who are unaware of being studied (Angrosino 2008, 165–166).

tion varied greatly depending on the occasion. Some rituals and religious practices were basically the women's domain, in others the women participated but remained bystanders, and some functions, for one reason or other, were not even attended by women. Gradually the regular and recurrent behavior became clear from the variable components of the religious practices.

In recent handbooks on fieldwork methods more attention has been paid to the process in which the participant observer transforms her lived experiences into written fieldnotes. The first fieldnotes, written on the spot, are considered highly important as the original source of ethnographical data. According to Robert M. Emerson & al., "writing fieldnotes, rather than writing finished ethnographies, provides the primal, even foundational moments of ethnographic representation: for most ethnographic monographs rely upon, incorporate, and may even be built from these initial fieldnotes" (Emerson & Fretz & Shaw 2002, 352). Along with data collection, the writing process in the field served the important purpose of deepening my local knowledge, developing the theoretical framework, and determining the central concepts of my study.

## 3.4 Constructing the list of questions

Before proceeding to selective observations it was necessary to determine how the women themselves interpreted and explained the mothering-related activities and practices. On the basis of the descriptive and focused observations and preliminary ethnographic analysis I moved on to formulate the questions relevant for the forthcoming interviews. In constructing the list of questions I consulted Professor Ishwita Mukherjee from the Women Studies Research Centre of the Kolkata University. Careful and detailed work with the questions helped not only in formulating suitable questions to be presented at the interviews but in clarifying the general research questions as well.

The construction of the list of questions started with dividing the study into four parts, which included questions concerning: 1) the background and origin of the research community; 2) how women were positioned within the community; 3) religious practices of women in particular; and 4) rituals related to fertility, childbirth and infant care. The preliminary list involved more general and abstract questions (see Appendix I), which concerned topics such as changes in identity, tradition and lifestyle of a particular immigrant community compared to their place of origin. I also wanted to hear women discuss their status within the community before proceeding to the main questions dealing with the key themes of this study. The preliminary list of questions was followed by the formulation of the actual concrete questions, which were equally grouped under four categories (see Appendix I).

In constructing the final list of questions, my aim was to ask both open and semi-structured questions, and leave space for the flow of thoughts as well. I wanted to keep in mind that questions direct the interviewee and thus have an influence on the research data. The questions were formulated to avoid any evaluation or attitude on my part. It was also necessary to keep the questions simple and concrete. An ethnographic interview should include descrip-

tive, structural, and contrast questions.[99] Descriptive questions are necessary for a researcher to become familiar with the interviewee's way of talking and thinking, and to find answers to what, where, and when questions. Structural questions are explanatory how questions, which are concerned with process, change, interventions, and outcomes, and allow a researcher to discover how the interviewees systematize their information. Finally, contrast questions that concern causes, reasons, and relationships help the researcher discover and specify the meanings employed by the terms and language.[100] At the initial stage of the interviews the majority of the questions were either descriptive or structural, but after going through the interviews I returned to the informants with more specific contrast questions.

In methodological literature, ethnographic interviews are categorized according to the nature of the interview, namely, how freely the interviewees themselves direct and govern the situation and topics of the interview.[101] Even though I preferred the unstructured method of interview, it would not have been enough for acquiring the information required for the study. Most likely the conversations would not have proceeded toward the sensitive themes I also wanted to cover. I settled on the semi-structured interview, an intermediate method between the open and structured interview, which Hirsjärvi & Hurme call a theme interview.[102] Theme interviews are generally considered suitable when touching upon emotionally sensitive topics and phenomena that people are not used to discussing.[103] In practice, I used the open and theme interviews side by side so that in the midst of the interview we occasionally entered a free conversation around the topics which the women were willing to talk about, but then again returned to the themes planned in advance.

[99] See, for example, Blaikie 2000, 60–61; Spradley 1979, 60.

[100] The difference between the descriptive, structural, and contrast questions can be demonstrated as follows: To gain knowledge about an individual's fasting practices, a descriptive question could be, for example: can you tell me about your fasting habits? Or, what fasts do you abide by? A structural question could be: what are the fasting restrictions? Or, what is the detailed procedure as regards fasting during the Aśok Ṣaṣṭhi brata? A contrast question could be: why do you not follow the same guidelines of fasting during the pilgrimages and Aśok Ṣaṣṭhi brata? Or, is there any difference in fasting during the pilgrimages and Aśok Ṣaṣṭhi brata?

[101] The two extremes are a fully structured interview based on a form planned in advance, and a fully unstructured interview, which is usually called an open interview. In the structured interviews the order and verbatim of the questions are the same for each interviewee, whereas an unstructured interview is informal and resembles a casual everyday conversation which freely floats from one theme to another (Burgess 1994, 107; 1993, 102; Fontana & Frey 2008, 124–126, 129; Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2008, 43; Hirsjärvi & al. 2009, 208–209; Wolcott 2001, 106).

[102] Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2008, 47. In English the theme interview is often referred to as a focused interview.

[103] Heyl argues that semi-structured interviewing is used by several feminist researchers because the method encourages the active involvement of the respondents in the construction of data about their lives (Heyl 2002, 374). Hirsjärvi & Hurme point out that some researchers consider the structured questionnaire a better option when dealing with sensitive issues. Writing about sensitive issues may be easier for some people than discussing it directly with the interviewer (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2008, 115).

## 3.5 Conducting the interviews

In the course of ethnographic fieldwork, most researchers employ various modes of interviews.[104] In the early stages of the fieldwork, I conducted numerous short open interviews which were neither planned in advance nor recorded.[105] These conversation-type-of-interviews provided me with important information, which was to be deepened later. As already mentioned, in the beginning I attended numerous community meetings and gathering sessions of women usually called by LWSI or a community committee. While participating in the meetings I was often given an opportunity to conduct group interviews.[106] I asked the groups how they managed with the various development initiatives. They were given a chance to tell success stories and reveal the challenges they had faced. In addition, discussions were opened on different themes which I was planning to study in more detail. Group interviews inspired people to talk and debate about issues they did not usually discuss in a group. Nigel King & Christine Horrocks contend that the advantage of the group interview is that it is more 'naturalistic' than an individual encounter with a lone interviewer.[107] It drives people into a dialog in which they can form their opinions and test them against others' ideas. Pekka Sulkunen argues that group interviews are especially applicable if the members of the group share a common interest.[108] The group has control over the discussion, which reduces the chance of people twisting the truth. This naturally works the opposite as well. People do not want to express opinions which differ from the conventional views of the group.[109] I found the group interviews a good way to get acquainted with people, open up discussion on the research themes, and then let the group reflect on these.

Before conducting the individual interviews I had to decide whether to run the interviews on my own or with the assistance of an interpreter.[110] LWSI offered me their support, but in my

[104] This is referred to as the multimethod or mixed methods approach or triangulation. Recent methodological literature generally recommends using the multimethod approach on the grounds that broader and better results can be achieved with the use of varied methods instead of one (Alexander & al. 2008, 127–128; Boeije 2010, 157–158; Fontana & Frey 2008, 152).

[105] Peräkylä identifies two distinctively different types of empirical materials in qualitative research: interviews and naturally occurring materials. Informal interviews, according to Peräkylä, can be placed between these two pure types, since the circumstances of these interviews are close to those naturally occurring (Peräkylä 2008, 351–352).

[106] The groups I interviewed, if not equivalent, can be compared to focus groups. In qualitative research terminology, focus group refers to a relatively homogeneous group of approximately 6–12 participants, which is interviewed for in-depth information around topics specified by the researcher. Recent methodological literature emphasizes the advantages of focus group interviews (see, for example, Cronin 2008, 227–228; Morgan 2002, 141; Morgan 2004, 263–264; Smithson 2008, 358; Wilkinson 2011, 168–169).

[107] King & Horrocks 2010, 61–62.

[108] Sulkunen 1990, 265.

[109] Eskola & Suoranta 1998, 96; King & Horrocks 2010, 61–62. According to Fontana & Frey, the advantage of group interviews is that they often produce rich data, they are stimulating for respondents, and their format is flexible (Fontana & Frey 2008, 128).

[110] The qualitative interview is also called an in-depth or intensive interview (Warren & Karner 2010, 127).

opinion the strong position and role in the neighbourhoods of the LWSI community organizers of the Kolkata urban project would inevitably influence the interviews too much. Assistance was sought from the University of Kolkata, who appointed a research fellow, Mou Bhattacharyya, from the Women Studies Research Centre to collaborate with me. She was to accompany me throughout the rest of the fieldwork during which altogether thirty-two women were interviewed; some of them twice or more. In the course of the interviews I realized that my language skills would not have been sufficient to run the interviews, especially in Janbazar, where some women spoke only Hindi and not much Bengali.

Before starting the interviews, Mrs. Bhattacharyya and I finalized the Bengali translation of the question list and discussed the main research themes that were to be incorporated into the interviews. The number of interviewees was not fixed beforehand, but interviews were to be continued until the saturation of the material, that is, as long as new essential information was presented.[111] Using an interpreter occasionally had a disadvantageous impact on the interviews. It was very challenging to for the interpreter to be disciplined enough to faithfully interpret each and every sentence. Sometimes when interviewees let themselves go, I lost track of what was said. I had to content myself with a more passive role while the native interpreter entered into a conversation with the interviewee. The fact that the interpreter was unable to memorize all that was said distanced me from the situation, which, of course, affected the interviewing process. Recent methodological literature on interviewing emphasizes that interviewing, contrary to the scientific image of its neutrality, is an active and collaborative process of those people involved in it. According to Fontana & Frey, the interview, instead of being merely a neutral exchange of asking questions and getting answers, is "a contextually bound and mutually created story" (Fontana & Frey 2008, 116). There is no denying that the presence of the interpreter complicated the interaction between myself and the interviewee, and thus had an impact on the interviews and research material. The positive side of it was that the interpreter, in responding to the interviewees' comments, posed important questions that I would have been unable to ask.

Only later on, after going though the transcripts of the interviews, did I fully comprehend what had been said. Had I understood everything while running the interviews, I would have immediately asked explanatory and contrast questions, and thus given the women a chance to clarify their answers. I must admit that knowing Bengali was at the same time my virtue and weakness as a researcher. It was extremely useful in conducting the fieldwork, but I should have known the language and the dialects even better to be able to respond immediately.

There was no special method of selecting the interviewees except that I wanted to include mothers of different ages. The interviews were started with women who had actively participated in the common endeavours of the community and with whom I had been able to build a

[111] The saturation of research material comes about when new material does not occur and the same information is repeated again and again (Hirsjärvi & al. 2009, 182).

confidential relationship while doing participant observation.[112] The meeting times for the interviews were fixed in advance even though they could not always be kept. Since most women had some spare time after lunch most interviews were conducted in the afternoon hours. I preferred to interview women in their homes – providing the family agreed – because we had some privacy and silence there, and because I was convinced that the home building itself, the way it was decorated and furnished, reflected each individual's mode of dwelling and being in the world.[113] It was, however, out of the question to restrain other people – neighbours, family members and whomever – from coming in and observing the procedure. In neighbourhoods like the communities studied, people live close together and they are used to sharing almost everything; an occasion such as a tape-recorded interview with a foreigner did not pass without notice. The effects of the outsiders' presence are likely the same as the group interviews in general.

Conducting the interviews in homes also added an extra flavour to it. People were exuberantly hospitable. When hanging around the neighbourhoods, chatting with people, casually visiting their homes, I was nobody's guest in particular, but when the time was fixed for the interview, some families took it as an official visit. Early on I always stressed that no serving or food was required. Most families had very little to spare for anything extra and buying even little treats was beyond their capacity. Yet most of them – according to their custom – would do anything for the sake of a guest. In carrying out the interviews I realized that some people believed that my request not to give me anything to eat was due to their status, namely, upper caste Hindus would not eat food they had touched. To break down that assumption I ate if they offered me something. I always brought with me some food gifts, usually bakery items, biscuits, local sweets and fruit. All of the interviewees received them happily without opposition.

It was important for me that women voluntarily consented to be interviewed. As we fixed the time and place, women were explained what the interview would be about, what type of topics would be covered, why it was being done, how long it would last, who would be present, and that the interview would be tape-recorded. Occasionally, if the husband was available, he was also informed about the forthcoming interview to avoid the feeling that I was working in secrecy. Despite fixing the time and place, planning ahead was not always of much use. Unexpected changes in plans occurred for the interviewee, myself, and the interpreter, and interviews were postponed and fixed again. Tape-recording with my uninteresting small machine did not seem to bother the women. At the beginning of the interview, a small microphone was placed in their saris, but it seemed to me that it was soon forgotten.

[112] In carrying out fieldwork, some participants are usually identified as key informants of the study. Becoming a key informant might be due to reasons such as the availability of a person, status within a group, or outgoing personality (Warren & Karner 2010, 77).

[113] In recent ethnographic studies much attention has been devoted to issues of space and place. The house, for example, is viewed as a "primary locus of the production and reproduction of social relations" and "far more than a physical structure providing shelter" (Tilley 2002, 263).

To ensure that the material was safely recorded and clearly understandable, I had a transcript of the tape-recoded interviews made by personnel from the Women Studies Research Centre of Kolkata University. They never fully finished the work, but fortunately most interviews were transcribed. Interviews which had been conducted in Hindi were translated into English. The few interview tapes which were not transcribed were later translated by myself.[114]

During the third fieldwork period, in 2008, I was able to meet with most of my interviewees once again. As the ethnographic analysis of the research data was in process, the results and conclusions needed to be tested. There was also a list of questions on some details which required more clarification. Both group and individual interviews were conducted. Because of some improvement in my language skills there was no interpreter, which had a positive impact on the result of the interviews. In Hindi speaking Janbazar, however, I was assisted by the LWSI staff.

## 3.6 Materials supporting the ethnography

As the fieldwork proceeded and the research material expanded, I needed to reflect on the material and test my interpretations and ethnographic analysis. Along with the field study on the three neighbourhoods I was running 'another fieldwork' elsewhere. I interviewed LWSI employees for background information about the socio-economic position of the neighbourhoods and the impact of local politics on the people. I also consulted several university scholars from the local universities in order to discuss my research interests and to map the previous and ongoing academic research around my topic. These contacts provided me with essential background information and helped to obtain a wider perspective beyond mere details.

The wide social network of my family during our stay in Kolkata resulted in our often being invited to join the celebrations of the religious feasts and family occasions. These were excellent opportunities to observe how people of different community backgrounds performed their rituals, and then compare these with the practices of the low caste communities. While socializing with our Kolkatan friends, I did not miss the chance to enquire about their mothering practices and rituals. These conversations helped me to pose more focused questions for the interviewees, and thus worked as important landmarks on the way to a deeper understanding of their customs.

Most interviewees occasionally performed rituals at nearby and more distant temples and pilgrimage sites. As part of the fieldwork I conducted short interviews of people visiting and performing rituals at those temples that women had mentioned by name. The aim was initially to observe what types of routines people had while attending the temples, and secondly, to enquire what motivated people to visit them. The aim was to clarify how the temples operated in general, what the visitors did there, and what visiting the holy sites meant for them. Obser-

[114] The longest interviews lasted up to two hours and the shortest about half an hour. The lengthiest transcript is sixty pages and the shortest roughly fifteen pages.

vations were made in the Kali temples of Dakshineswar and Kalighat, both of which are were important pilgrimage sites for several of my interviewees. The surroundings of the temples hosted extensive markets selling a variety of articles ranging from the ritual items used in the performing of the *pūjā* to god effigies, decorative items, posters, books, and leaflets on the ritual stories.

Observing and exploring the temples and the surrounding market proved to be an essential source of information. It occurred to me that some activities were performed by most temple visitors and some by those who came with a special purpose in mind. Most came to do *pūjā* and offer gifts to the deity. Some came to give a promise (*mānasika*) to the deity and some to fulfil one. The temple market offered ritual articles, images, and posters similar to those the women in my study had in their homes. There was a good selection of booklets and tracts on rituals and deities, also important source material for my study.

## 3.7 Evaluating the ethnographic data, fieldwork, and the researcher's influence on them

In evaluating the success of the ethnographic process a few distinct matters need to be considered: First, I will discuss the various criteria applied in evaluating the ethnographic data and analysis; second, I will assess the accountability of my implementation of the fieldwork, and third, I will consider the possible influence of the researcher's characteristics on the research.

In assessing the ethnographic data and analysis the most common criteria are its validity and reliability. In recent methodological literature the adequacy of these criteria has been questioned by claiming that although applicable in assessing quality of the quantitative research these hardly are sufficient in evaluating qualitative research.[115] Several attempts have been made to create alternative criteria for assessing qualitative research. For example, Martyn Hammersley in his earlier writing suggests that instead of validity and reliability the more adequate criteria would be truth and relevance of the material.[116] In his latter account, Hammersley doubts the existence of uniform criteria and claims that "how we assess research findings must vary according to the nature of the knowledge claims being made and the methods employed" (Hammersley 2008, 46). One of the most influential attempts is the four criteria model, according to which the research material should be evaluated in terms of its credibility, transferability, trackable variance, and confirmability.[117] Successful evaluation may be

[115] See, for example, Hammersley 1995, 65–67; Hammersley 2008, 46–48; Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2008, 185; King & Horrocks 2010, 158.

[116] Hammersley 1995, 67–78.

[117] The four-criteria model (credibility, transferability, trackable variance and confirmability) is introduced by Lincoln and Gupa (1985) and reviewed by King & Horrocks 2010, 160-161. According to the model, credibility refers to the extent to which researchers' interpretations are endorsed by those with whom the research was conducted. Transferability is based on the ability of researchers to provide sufficiently rich detail so that a reader can assess the extent to which the conclusion drawn in one setting can transfer to another setting. Trackable variance is shown by the researchers demonstrating that they have taken into account the inherent instability of the phenomenon they are studying. Confirmability is shown if researchers present sufficient detail of the process of data

achieved through the different composition of criteria, assuming the criteria are well argued and defined. In this study I decided to assess the main criteria of validity and reliability.

The validity of the research data and analysis is based on the researcher's "loyalty and commitment to representing as fully" and truthfully "as possible the people and settings being studied" (Warren & Karner 2010, 8). Validity must be assessed both internally and externally. Internal validity is shown by the consistency and logical relationship of the hypothesis, concepts, and theoretical conclusions, which should be tested repeatedly in the course of the research process. External validity is realized when interviewees give accurate information, and when the researcher describes the observed situations as they are, and makes correct conclusions from them.[118] David Silverman highlights that in interview research, the elemental question of validity is whether the views expressed by the interviewees reflect their understanding and attitudes outside the interview situation, or whether they are the outcome of the interview setting itself.[119] Hennie Boeije maintains that external validity refers to the generalizability of the research and "pertains to whether the results of a study can be generalized beyond the specific research context" (Boeije 2010, 180). Another criteria, the reliability of the research data and analysis, is commonly understood to refer to the degree to which there is consistency in the research process.[120] It is commonly held that research data and conclusions are proved reliable if other scholars conducting the same study would come to the same conclusions, or if the research was repeated in a similar manner or through parallel methods, the results would still be consistent.[121]

Several factors need to be taken into account when testing the reliability of the research material.[122] Firstly, the material should be congruent, and it should be tested by several indicators. Each indicator should confirm the same view. Secondly, the material should prove accurate, which may be assured by repeating the observation or asking the same question several times, and then comparing the results. The third factor is the objectivity of the research and how others perceive the intentions of the researcher. The objectivity may be increased by having more than one person to observe the same situation. Finally, the research should question the conti-

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collection and analysis so that a reader can see how they might reasonably have reached the conclusions they did.

[118] See, for example, Grönfors 1985, 174; Warren & Karner 2010, 8. It is important to take into account that research results are influenced by historical and cultural factors, and are necessarily bound to certain contexts (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2008, 188).

[119] Silverman 2010, 225–229.

[120] See, for example, Angrosino 2007, 124.

[121] Hirsjärvi & al. 2009, 231; Shaffir & Stebbins 1991, 12–13; Warren & Karner 2010, 8; Wolcott 2001, 167. It should also be taken into account that research material can be simultaneously reliable yet far from valid. Regardless of whether the researcher manages to form adequate research questions and conduct an interview in an accurate manner, the research material is valid only if the interviewee understands the questions as expected and gives truthful answers. According to Christine L. Williams, reliability in qualitative research is often emphasized at the cost of validity (Williams 1991, 240).

[122] See, for example, Grönfors 1985, 175–176; Procter 2008, 218.

nuity of a particular phenomenon. It may be tested by observing the phenomenon at different times repeatedly.

In order to confirm a correct understanding, my rule number one as a field worker was to ask several people to exlain in their own words what a certain phenomenon meant, what was happening, and why. If the explanations were contradictory, or if my observations were contrary to the explanations, I had to clarify the reason. The interviewees and others in the research communities came to realize that I kept repeating the same questions. Some may have thought that I did this because of my insufficient language skills, but it had occurred to me that the most simple and 'stupid questions' were in fact the best and most fruitful ones. Asking them gave interviewees the impression that they had to explain to this 'ignorant foreigner' how things really were, and what one should do, believe, and think. These explanations openly exposed their attitudes and views. Alongside the fieldwork I also kept reading ethnographies and research literature dealing with topics that my study concerned. My findings were often tested with people from outside the research communities as well, for example with the LWSI staff, university employees, and my local friends. I noticed that some members of the educated middle class did not necessarily want to admit the existence of certain practices and beliefs, which they labelled as superstitions, or, if they agreed, they added that these would soon become extinct. The research data and analysis of this study are the outcome of the observations; constant questioning and rewriting of the research questions; identifying and developing the essential concepts; and reflecting on the findings in relation to the scholarly literature.

The ethnographic research also needed to be assessed in the light of how successfully the fieldwork was implemented. Grönfors suggests that in evaluating the fieldwork, the following principles should be considered: The more time in the field, the more accurate information a researcher may obtain about the meanings people give to phenomena; the geographically closer to the field, the better chances for a researcher to understand these meanings; the more varied the situations a researcher participates in, the more reliable the information; the more extensive the knowledge of the language, the more precise the information; and, the closer the relationship with the research community, the better the possibility of obtaining true to life and significant information about the lives of the community.[123]

In the following, my fieldwork is evaluated in the light of Grönfors's principles. The three fieldwork periods conducted for my research lasted altogether ten months, the longest continuous period being eight months. The ideal would have been to stay in Kolkata for a whole year – the standard practice of anthropologists – in order to see the annual rhythm in totality, but considering the research topic and the assistance I was provided with at the initial stage, ten months was sufficient.[124] Conducting fieldwork in a completely different culture and environment was a great challenge. Despite a one-year stay in India and research on the country prior to the fieldwork, as well as an elementary knowledge of the language, the fieldwork pe-

[123] Grönfors 1985, 177.

[124] Okely 1994, 22.

riods were my first true immersion into the Bengali culture and lifestyle – and urban poverty. During conversations with the people of the research communities, I was actually not just collecting research data, but learning the language, symbols, and meanings that people particularly in these communities bestowed on the words, phrases, and gestures. I had to start with the basics, which, however, proved to be the most fruitful way to do research on a culture different from mine. Nothing was taken for granted; I had to question even the smallest detail. I also had to take into account that many discourses familiar to me were strange and unknown to the studied women, and the other way around. Richardson & Adams St. Pierre argue that "what something means to individuals is dependent on the discourses available to them" (Richardson & Adams St. Pierre 2008, 476). Accordingly, the learning of my informants' discourses was taken as one of the main priorities in understanding their positions.[125]

Owing to several practical reasons I was not able to live among the people of the three neighbourhoods, which would obviously have been a very mind-broadening way to run the fieldwork. Usually I spent a day in each of the three communities once or twice a week. If there was a special occasion, celebration, or feast coming up, I stayed overnight to observe and participate in the occasion. At those times I was accompanied by my husband since it was considered improper for a woman to spend a night somewhere without her husband and family. On these visits I learned many things that were not as openly shared during the daytime. For example, several families in each of the three communities suffered from the men's misuse of alcohol and intoxicants.

Before the fieldwork I had intended to participate in a home birth, but it proved to be difficult to arrange. There were a few deliveries during my stay in each community, but most of them happened in hospitals. According to the local midwives (*dhāi*), home births still occurred but they were not always planned, so they did not manage to inform me in time. Thus, I had to rely on what was told to me by the women interviewed instead of my personal observations.

By the end of the fieldwork, the research data seemed to include enough congruence as well as variation to be credible and to fulfil the external validity requirement. The data displayed the customs and conventions of the community in general as well as the habits of a certain family and interviewee in particular. In my estimation, the warm and friendly relationships, and the trust between the researcher and the informants, had a positive influence on the fieldwork, and thus also on the research material. I assume that several women talked about personal matters that were not easy to share even with other members of the community. Open, uncomplicated, and cordial relationships with most informants continued until the end of the fieldwork, which I interpret as positive feedback.

[125] In the introductory Chapter 1 stated that knowing and describing the context of the study (Geerz) was one of the starting points of my ethnographic approach. There is likely nothing as elementary for knowing the context as learning and recognizing the different discourses of the people studied.

Since qualitative research is essentially researcher-specific, the subjectivity of the researcher must be considered in evaluating the research material.[126] In their article on qualitative writing, Laurel Richardson & Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre state that it is the researcher herself/himself – rather than the questionnaire or census tape – that is the instrument of the study.[127] The research data is influenced not only by time, place, social situation, language, and intimacy, but also by the life experience, age, sex, race, physical appearance, and mentality of the researcher.[128] In research that is conducted in a setting extremely diverse from the researcher's own, these attributes are probably of more importance than in studies conducted among one's 'own people'. Many of these attributes and their probable influence on the research have already been discussed above, so I will concentrate on assessing the mentality of the researcher.

As a result of their class association low caste women in the three neighbourhoods were more than used to others looking down on them. This became obvious from comments such as "rickshaws do not like to enter our neighbourhood", "people avoid coming here", "they think that it is dirty here".[129] These women expected others to despise them. According to the Indian social code, people of lower status are treated accordingly, seldom in a gracious manner. On the other hand, the women usually assumed that if someone approached to them in an open manner, they were likely of the same or a lower status. I pretended not to be aware of these behavioural codes, and approached people without taking into consideration their status or class association. At first, this was rather confusing for my informants. How should they deal with someone who does not bother about their social rules? It evoked suspicion and uncertainty among them. Had I kept my distance, not looked them in the eye, shown gestures expressing my superiority, it would have been easier for them. After getting used to my presence and my unusual way of addressing them, this breaking of a social code turned out to be a great advantage for my research. It was an important element in the process of building a trusting relationship.

## 3.8 Approaching the analysis

In the early stages of the fieldwork I realized the importance of the careful formation of research questions, and how this process is closely interlinked with the analytical process of ethnography. The research questions were defined again and again in accordance with the findings and development of the central concepts of the study. I found myself repeatedly asking what it was that I was actually trying to find out. This simple question (of a sometimes

[126] As previously made clear, this is one of Gadamer's main arguments. He emphasizes the importance of examining the pre-understanding and historically conditioned situation of the researcher in interpreting the research material.

[127] Richardson & Adams St. Pierre 2008, 474.

[128] Amit 2000, 2–3; Burgess 1993, 88; Eskola & Suoranta 1998, 103; Hammersley & Atkinson 1995, 92–99; Warren & Karner 2010, 85–88.

[129] These types of comments were commonplace in the three communities.

confused fieldworker) helped me to be attentive to the creative process that I was going through in the field.

In qualitative research the analysis of the research data is closely bound to the ethnographic research process and the writing process in general.[130] The analysis method in this study draws from the grounded theory approach, although not in its purest sense.[131] The main constituent of the grounded theory is the inductive approach, which, according to Paul Hodkinson, means that "instead of testing pre-formed hypotheses, inductive researchers attempt to develop new theory from their empirical observations of the social world" (Hodkinson 2008, 81). Kathy Charmaz adds that "the grounded theory […] emphasizes simultaneous data collection and analysis" (Charmaz 2008, 461). While my study to a certain extent relies on the theoretical framework of the gift theories – the main feature of the deductive approach – the research approach is primarily inductive: the research conclusions are based on the processing of the empirical data.

According to the grounded theory guidelines, the writing of the ethnographic analysis already starts from the very beginning of the fieldwork as the researcher commences to organize the initial descriptive observations in the field dairy.[132] This tentative ethnographic analysis is required for the fieldwork to proceed from descriptive to focused and selective observations and questions. The first fieldwork phase usually involves recognition of recurrent behavioural models, as well as identification and initial grouping of different culture-specific concepts. The selection and revision of the research questions, central concepts, and terms continue throughout the fieldwork, and act as a template for further analysis. The reorganization of and reflection on the research data enables a researcher to gradually draw conclusions of the details from what someone said or of what happened, and to bring the data to a more general and theoretical level.[133]

In recent methodological literature the producing of ethnographies has been referred to as creative analytical processes (CAP).[134] According to Richardson & Adams St. Pierre, "CAP ethnography displays the writing process and the writing product as deeply intertwined. The product cannot be separated from the producer, the mode of production, or the method of knowing" (Richardson & Adams St. Pierre 2008, 478). The idea of ethnography as CAP is, in fact, very similar to Gadamer's notion of understanding as a historically conditioned event, during which the worlds of interpreter and interpreted are united in what Gadamer calls "the

[130] See, for example, Bryman & Burgess 2001, 217; Hammersley & Atkinson 1995, 205; Richardson & Adams St.Pierre 2008, 477–478; Mäkelä 1990, 45.

[131] The theory was first created by Glaser & Strauss in 1967, and then developed by several scholars (see, for example, Charmaz 2002, 675–694; Charmaz 2004, 496–521; Charmaz 2008, 461–478; Charmaz & Bryant 2011, 292; Hodkinson 2008, 80–100; Koskela 2007, 91–110).

[132] Charmaz 2008, 471–473.

[133] In Pike's terms, this is the *etic* level of study – the result of a researcher arranging, interpreting, and analysing the material (Pike 1967, 37-41).

[134] Richardson & Adams St. Pierre 2008, 477.

fusion of horizons" (Gadamer 1995, 306–307). Similarly, qualitative writers as creative analytical practicants are understood as persons analysing the data from a particular position at a specific time. Readers, for their part, are thought to "deserve to know how the researchers claim to know" and "how [~~do~~] the authors position themselves as knowers and tellers" (Richardson & Adams St. Pierre 2008, 478).[135]

In this study the ethnographic research data is classified by themes and types. Identifying data that throws light on the main research questions and theoretical assumptions, and classifying the data by themes was a process that continued throughout the ethnographic phases. According to King & Horrocks, the aim is "not only to produce a list of themes but also to organise those themes in a way that reflects how they are conceptualised to relate to each other" (King & Horrocks 2010, 150). This also involves the identification of hierarchical relationships and division of the material into main themes and sub-themes. Afterwards, the occurrence of certain themes can be compared. The classification by types, for its part, rests on the material organized in accordance with the themes. The classification by types requires grouping similar things together and forming models based on the types. However, recognizing similarities alone leaves the analysis unbalanced, and a better understanding of the similarities can be achieved through identification of disparities as well. The process of classification condenses the extensive material into representative types, each of which conveys considerable information. At best, the types provide a wide-ranging yet economic view of the research material.[136]

In regard to this study, the initial classification by themes was done as I worked on the outline of the questions. The list of questions served as a helpful tool throughout the study, even at more advanced stages of the analysis. However, the two most crucial features determining the research were the discovery of the dominant category 'mothering ritual', and the resolve to approach the research material in the framework of the gift exchange. After the discovery of the concept of mothering ritual, the mission was to identify different kinds of mothering rituals, and determine the types of mothering rituals in accordance with the research material. At the same time, the material was viewed with the aim of identifying various implications of the gift exchange. This provided the work with an essential and logical structure, and a fruitful way to proceed. The types of mothering rituals were organized chronologically starting from rituals performed before the birth of a child and for increasing fertility, continuing with the birth rites, and finally encompassing the rituals done for the well-being of a child. This order helped to situate each piece of information under the model consisting of types of mothering rituals. The intention was not to finalize the types too early, but to leave the door open for new types to come.[137] Along with forming a model of the types of mothering rituals I also

[135] It is important to note that knowing and acknowledging the situatedness of the researcher differs from what is understood as autobiographic ethnography, in which professional researchers incorporate their own personal narratives into their ethnographic texts (Reed-Danahay 2002, 407).

[136] Eskola & Suoranta 1998, 175–176, 182; King & Horrocks 2010, 150; Mäkelä 1990, 45.

[137] Methodologists have given different names to the each part of the ethnographic process. According to Spradley, the analysis begins with the search for cultural domains, continues with taxonomic and componential anal-

worked on the definition of the mothering ritual in this particular study, and how the exchange of gifts materialize in these rituals. Thus, the conceptual and analytical processes were bound together, and contributed to and influenced one another in a useful way.

This chapter has described the ethnographic process that involves planning and carrying out the fieldwork, and handling and analysing the ethnographic data. The detailed description of how the data was obtained, and how it was processed, is meant to convince the reader of its authenticity and reliability.

yses, which lead to the discovery of cultural themes and finally to a cultural inventory (Spradley 1979, vii, 224–226; Spradley 1980, ix–xi, 180–182).

# PART III: MOTHERS AND MOTHERING RITUALS

# 4 Research sites and women interviewed

## 4.1 Three communities representing different cultures and backgrounds

In the following chapter, I will first introduce and "thickly" describe the setting of the fieldwork and varied socio-demographic details of the women interviewed. Then I will discuss the position of low castes in the Indian social hierarchy, and finally, assess the main religious currents that influence the religious practices of the women interviewed.

The main part of the fieldwork was carried out in three Kolkatan neighbourhoods (*pāṛā*). The sample of three neighbourhoods does not, of course, represent all low caste communities of urban Kolkata even though many features of the sample can be found in other communities as well. The common feature that brings the people of these three communities together is that their task in the society is to serve others. They belong to those groups of people that engage in the various menial jobs commonly despised and regarded as polluting by others. The members of these communities are mainly from villages outside and around the state of West Bengal; they come to the metropolitan state capital city in the hopes of a livelihood and a better life. Some of my informants were newcomers whereas others were already second or third generation immigrants. Most families come as a cheap labour force responding to the requirements of the urban upper caste society.

All of the thirty-two interviewees lived in the neighbourhoods of Janbazar, Harijan Basti, and Ganti, each of which is a different type of urban slum.[138] A great majority of Janbazaris came from the states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh and belonged to the Chamar community. The majority of the male folk were still engaged in their traditional trade of processing leather. The ancestors of the people of Harijan Basti came from the state of Orissa. They had originally come to Kolkata to work as sweepers in the military camp. The Ganti community differed from the other two in that it was a heterogeneous neighbourhood, where a range of low castes and tribal people mainly

[138] In the UN-Habitat global report the origins of the Kolkata slums (*basti*; often in English texts transcribed as *bustee*) are classified as follows: The oldest slums in the heart of the city are associated with the early period of British rule before the industrial development and urbanisation. A group of people came to serve the imperial rulers and built their dwellings near the British quarters. The second group of slums emerged as an outcome of the industrialisation-based rural-urban migration starting from around the 1930s. The jute and engineering industries required labourers, who took up their quarters around the industrial sites. The third group of slums came into being after India became independent. The remaining vacant urban lands, areas by the roadsides and canals, were inhabited by migrants arriving in Kolkata. One more group are refugees, particularly from present-day Bangladesh, who began immigrating to Kolkata as a result of the Indo-Pakistan war. They were placed mainly in the Refugee Resettlement Colonies at the outreaches of Kolkata, generally considered as a type of slum. The slums in Kolkata are divided into two broad categories: 1) officially authorised and registered slums and 2) unauthorised, unregistered slums comprising a range of squatter settlements. The main difference between these two is that those dwelling in registered slums have some form of secure tenure or ownership rights based on land rent or lease, whereas in unregistered land encroaching settlements there is no tenure security available (Kundu 2003, 4–7). My three study areas represent all of these types. Because my informants did not refer to their living quarters as slums, I prefer to call them neighbourhoods.

from the eastern side of Bengal territory lived together. Ganti also hosted a number of Bangladeshi refugees.

Several interviewees from each of the three neighbourhoods mentioned that members of the upper class avoided visiting their localities, because they were considered dirty and unappealing. The shame felt because of the living conditions was clearly expressed in many of the women's comments, such as mentioning recent improvements in sanitary conditions.

### Janbazar

Janbazar is located in the heart of the old urban city centre of Kolkata, right next to the main marketing area of the New Market. The neighbouring quarters are filled to capacity by both long-standing and relatively new immigrant communities, most of them engaged in the dealings of the market. The area also hosts a substantial Muslim minority. The Janbazar community of this study is actually one part of the wider Janbazar district.[139] The neighbourhood I studied is formed around a side street off the main street, Suredranath Banerji Road, which leads to several side alleys. What makes it stand out as a single unit is that most people are Chamars and in one way or other are involved in the shoe-making trade, the traditional occupation of this Chamar community.[140]

[139] Janbazar was already listed in 1785 as one of the thirty-one police stations of Kolkata. The area has a long history of intergration between people of various nationalities and backgrounds (Nair 1990, 15).

[140] Chamar in Bengali is spelled Cāmāra.

Figure 2: Shoe-making is one of the traditional occupations of Chamars. Most men (and boys) in Janbazar practise the skill.

People come to Janbazar mainly from the states that located north of West Bengal. According to the members of the community, it consists of roughly five hundred families, but in most cases, family means only the male members of the family. Some individuals and families are blood relatives, but a good number of people have no blood ties with any other member of the neighbourhood. The main thing that has drawn people together is the wish to make a living among their own kind. What made Janbazar special as well as challenging as a study area was the sex ratio of the community. Most Janbazaris were men who had immigrated to the city, but who had a house, wife, and family in their home village. The majority of the Janbazaris practised seasonal migration. Men worked the most part of the year in the city and returned to the village for two to three months usually during the hot season. The village wives and relatives came to visit occasionally, but the overcrowded neighbourhood did not have facilities or space for all of them to settle in. Living in Janbazar was – especially for many newcomers – only a necessary working arrangement. Important occasions such as family feasts and religious festivals were mainly celebrated in the villages among relatives. Thus, Janbazar was a place of constant flux of people coming and going to the villages and back. Two of the interviewees were village wives temporarily staying in Kolkata. According to a young mother, Anga, this arrangement of husbands spending most of the time working in the city was a source of trouble and dissatisfaction for fam-

ilies.[141] As a result, despite the congestion and limited facilities, some families decided to put up with the conditions, left their home village, and settled permanently in Janbazar.

A visitor entering the Janbazar neighbourhood comes face to face with an almost surreal sight: men sitting pressed together in tight rows at both sides of the alley, each engaged in some stage of shoe- making. Women are totally absent. According to the traditional custom of the Chamar community, women are not allowed to expose their faces to men other than their husbands and minors belonging to their family. Women follow the practice of *purdah*, strict separation of men and women, better known in the Muslim contexts.[142] Women are only seen covered in veils, if at all. This practice is still enforced in most families of the Janbazar Chamar community. Consequently, women's territory is limited to a minimum. During my research period, some women never left their house without someone chaperoning them; others rushed to the market their faces covered and came back as quickly as possible. Other than that, they remained at home. The maintenance of strict isolation obviously resulted partly from the uneven sex ratio in Janbazar. Husbands who had brought their families to the city were concerned about the safety and chastity of their wives. Some religious celebrations were an exception to the custom, but even then everything was carefully controlled. However, some families in Janbazar did not bother about restricting the women in the traditional way, and women were given more freedom to move about and socialize with others.

The in-laws of Unni were demanding about the observance of *purdah*, but her husband allowed her to go to the market. This is what Unni told about her practice of *purdah*:[143]

> When I visit my in-laws' place, it is impossible to go out. We have to wear veils. It is taboo to talk or laugh with any other person outside the house. All that is permissible is to talk to your husband inside the house. When my father-in-law was alive, he used to do all the marketing. But after his death we must do it. My husband hardly finds time to do the chores. So I have no other alternative than to hurriedly do the marketing and come back.

Most women did not question the obeying of the *purdah* even though they mentioned the inconvenience it caused them. *Purdah* restrictions denied women the opportunity to participate in any meeting or get-together of the community. This, of course, lessened their chances of influencing decision making on issues concerning their neighbourhood. During my fieldwork period in 2003, the community was planning to celebrate World Literacy Day, and there was a heated discussion between men with more fundamental views and those who also wanted to invite women to the celebration. As a compromise, it was planned that women would be smuggled to the venue before the programme started, and that their seats would be covered with a curtain so they could

[141] Anga was interviewed in her sister-in-law's house in Janbazar on 4 December 2003.

[142] Gold 1994, 168. The practice of *purdah* in the Indian context is often called *zenana*, which refers to the inner dwellings of a house in which the women of the family live (Minault 1994, 108). On *purdah*, see also Jeffery 1979.

[143] Unni was interviewed in her house in Janbazar on 6 January 2004.

not be seen. This plan did not, however, realize. When I arrived to Janbazar for the celebration, women were absent.[144] This invisibility, however, did not mean that the women of Janbazar were powerless or without influence. Their isolation from men brought them closer together. Their separate world formed a sub-culture in the backyards of the Janbazar Chamar community, a culture which had its own rules and which was concerned with the interests of women in particular. The women's sphere was also the area where women's rituals and other religious practices flourished.

[144] Fieldwork diary, 8–9 September 2003.

Figure 3: In Janbazar most women follow the practice of *purdah* and are seen only covered in veils.

The Chamar community of Janbazar had started to develop in 1943, and was later established with the formation of a community committee. From the very beginning the identity of the neighbourhood was based on the cobbler business, similar to many other Chamar communities. Shoemakers are also referred to as Mucis.[145] The vocation is symbolised by the temple located in the middle of the main lane. The temple is dedicated to Rabi Das, the revered guru of the Chamar society – he himself also a son of a leather merchant.[146] Chamars are one of the largest low caste groups, especially in the northern states of India. The main duty of Chamars used to be removing the carcasses of dead animals from sight. Nowadays, the majority is still engaged in processing animal skin and hide. They are known for their skills in manufacturing a wide range of leather articles. The status of each Chamar community depends on what stage of the process they are involved in. Those removing dead animals are considered lower than those engaged in skinning or tanning. The more advanced stages of the process, from sewing the leather goods to negotiating the sales contracts, are seen as superior.[147]

Shoe manufacturing produces considerable toxic waste. In Janbazar, most of the waste was not removed from the neighbourhood. Huge rubbish mountains, which seemed to grow continuously, were situated next to people's dwellings. This obviously was not a pretty sight, and the rubbish mountain took up valuable space from other activities – not to mention the harmful effects of poisonous chemicals on the health of the residents. Even according to Kolkata standards Janbazar is unimaginably congested. For many men, the workplace is also where they sleep. Every corner of the neighbourhood is filled to capacity. Shoemanufacturing also employs young boys, and it was not rare to see twelve to fifteen-year-old boys lining up with the older men. I was told that access to clean water and electricity is regulated and unreliable. However, for women such hardships were minor ones compared to the main challenge, the male majority. The Janbazari interviewee Anga expressed her dissatisfaction as follows:

> There are many male members in this building. So we have to visit the toilet early in the morning at four o'clock. During the day we hesitate to attend nature's call. I feel very ashamed. It is a very difficult life. Earlier I used to stay at a better building with facilities. Calcutta has changed over the years for the better, but this part has not changed a bit. It is only here that a shanty town exists. How dirty this place is, with its filth and squalor.

[145] According to Risley, Muci is the cobbler caste, which by origin is a branch of the Chamars. Some Mucis repudiate the name Chamar and claim to be a distinct caste of somewhat higher social position (Risley 1998, Vol II, 95). The characteristics by which a sub-caste (such as Muci) can be distinguished from a caste (such as Chamar) are migration, change of customs, occupational distinction, difference in occupational techniques, political decision or, intention to rise in status (Ahuja 2005, 39–40).

[146] Rabi Das, except of being a saint guru, is also a name of a group of Chamars (leather workers) who identify themselves according to the name of their saint. Rabi Dasis have adopted Das as their family name and form an identifiable community or caste which is recognized in the Census classification of Scheduled castes (on Rabi Dasis, see Ganguly-Scrase 2001). Even if my Janbazari interviewees worshipped the saint Rabi Das, they did not, however, identify themselves as Rabi Dasis.

[147] Mendelsohn & Vicziany 2000, 48–49; Risley 1998, Vol II, 95–99.

Other Janbazari women were not as negative as Anga. They admitted the inconveniences and worried about the men's drinking habits, overall restlessness, and disturbances, but other than that, most interviewees found the neighbourhood satisfactory. They appreciated the availability of education and health care, which were missing in the villages. Some had formed a strong alliance and friendship with other women of the neighbourhood. In the margins of the community they had created a sub-culture of their own, which combined the experience and customs of their past village life with the new urban reality.

### Harijan Basti

The second community selected for this study is Harijan Basti. The name literally means the slum (*basti*) of the children of God (*Harijan*).[148] The neighbourhood is part of the administrative area of the Dum Dum municipality in northern Kolkata. The neighbourhood began to develop approximately one hundred and fifty years ago when the Oriyan forefathers and mothers of the community started to immigrate to Kolkata, initially to work as sweepers in the military camp. Families of the earliest immigrants have inhabited the neighbourhood for five to six generations. The military camp was demolished decades ago, but the community has remained in the same locality. The latest immigrants arrived in Kolkata some thirty to forty years ago. Young brides, of course, keep coming from Orissa as they are married to Harijan Basti families.

Most of the women interviewed in Harijan Basti were born in Kolkata and had no experience of life in Orissa. They knew the village or city where their ancestors had lived, and some women occasionally went to visit their relatives, but contacts with their origins became fewer and fewer and some had lost contact entirely. The Harijan Basti locality consists of some 130 families, each and every member of which is called Nayek. Even though they came to Kolkata to do sweeping, they were not originally a sweeper caste. The same happened to several other low caste groups, who left their traditional occupation and responded to requirements of the urban society.[149] Women mentioned that their grandparents and parents had worked as agricultural labourers; one claimed that her parents used to tie bamboo baskets for sale. Others did not know about their ancestors' life in Orissa since their families had settled in Kolkata generations earlier.

Regardless of the urban environment, some residents of Harijan Basti raise pigs or chickens in the neighbourhood. The locality is filled to capacity with narrow alleys winding around the small concrete houses. Everyday life is challenged by poor sewage and waste management, which along with common latrines are a major health risk for the people. The neighbourhood also has a

[148] The term *Harijan* was adopted in 1933 by Mahatma Gandhi, who wanted to invent a name for the untouchables that would not label them with inferior status. However, the term has not been given a warm welcome by all the low caste people as they think that the name implies that they are frail, weak, and to be taken care of (Mendelsohn & Vicziany 2000, 3). The name Harijan Basti did not puzzle the members of the community. It was openly used and referred to, although no-one could explain who had first called the community by that name.

[149] Searle-Chatterjee 1981, 96.

night shelter complex hosting tens of homeless families. They have come from different places and are not considered as members of the Harijan Basti community.

The venue of most activities is the community centre of the Harijan Basti sporting club. During my fieldwork, people gathered there for meetings, feasts, non-formal schooling, and for casual socializing with others. In front of the club house there was a small open field and temple dedicated to the goddess of Mā Śītalā. The temple doors remained locked most of the time and were opened only during the feasts. Several sacred trees in the inner quarters of the neighbourhood also represented Mā Śītalā, the main deity of the community.

Most Harijan Basti women who are engaged in duties outside the home work as housemaids, and thus, still maintain the sweeper status. The male members of Harijan Basti are hired as labourers in factories, construction sites, and for the municipality. Despite the changes and passing time the community still carries the old stigma. Namely, sweepers in Indian society carry the status of the lowest of the low in both traditional and modern occupational hierarchies, which is marked by the fact that they are physically isolated from the rest of the society.[150] According to the interviewees and other community members, the reputation of Harijan Basti used to be wretched. Even rickshaw pullers – who themselves are not of much higher social status – refused to enter Harijan Basti. Some members of the community ran illegal distilleries and sold alcohol, causing rowdiness and restlessness in the neighbourhood. Many women suffered because of the heavy drinking of their husbands. At the time of the interviews, most women contended that the situation was changing for the better. The local police had closed down the distilleries, which had improved the neighbourhood environment. This is what Raji tells about the Harijan Basti locality:[151]

> Our neighbourhood used to be really bad, but little by little it is getting better. It was so dirty here, no one was listening to any advice. There was excrement and dirt all over. But it is getting better. […] Previously men drank alcohol; there was beating and fighting. We stayed inside the house with the doors locked. We were afraid to go out and our children also did not go out. In the evenings there was fighting. We were so scared. Now we have the club and the boys are keeping watch at night. It is much better now.

During my fieldwork in 2003-2004 people were optimistic about the good developments in the neighbourhood, even though drinking still seemed to be a common pastime, and the distilleries had not completely closed down. Young men had organized themselves under the Harijan Basti Sporting Club committee and were guarding the area at night. Children were invited to attend an informal slum school, while women had formed several self-help groups and were participating in adult education classes. The self-esteem of the community was also seen by the active role people took in organizing a range of community celebrations – both religious and political. When I returned to Harijan Basti in 2008, the former enthusiasm and

[150] Searle-Chatterjee 1981, 7.

[151] Raji was interviewed in the clubhouse of Harijan Basti on 5 February 2004.

optimism were somewhat missing and the community faced the very same challenges it had always had.

As the people of Harijan Basti had a long history of close contact and interaction with the surrounding foreign society, they had started to give up their old Oriyan way of life and adopt new customs, language and lifestyle. They were influenced not only by Bengalis but also by the customs of Bihari and other communities. The younger generation could no longer differentiate between the customs of Oriyan origin and those borrowed from elsewhere.

### Ganti

Ganti, the third neighbourhood in this study, is one of the several refugee colonies in the district of North 24 Parganas at the northern outskirts of great Kolkata. The colony dates from the early 1970s as a result of the influx of Bengali refugees coming from the present Bangladesh (former East Pakistan) and the eastern regions of West Bengal. The influx of refugees from eastern parts of the Bengal started initially after the partition of Bengal into East and West Bengal in 1947, but grew to massive proportions as a consequence of the Bangladesh liberation war (*Mukti Juddha*) in 1971 and the subsequent atrocities committed against the Hindu minority in Bangladesh.[152] Within a few decades India and especially the border states of West Bengal, Bihar, Assam, Meghalaya, and Tripura had received millions of refugees. A number of them found their way into the metropolitan city of Kolkata and its surroundings. Altogether seven of my eleven Ganti interviewees were originally from Bangladesh. One of them had not personally lived in Bangladesh, but her parents had escaped from there to one of the border towns. Most Ganti people had first settled in a village or town located in the eastern district of West Bengal, mostly in Sundarban, and then come to Kolkata in search of livelihood. A few were originally from Kolkata itself, but had come to Ganti through marriage. A few families had also come from Bihar and as far as Punjab, but they formed only a tiny minority in Ganti.

Ganti is a mixed community consisting of about 158 families from different low caste and tribal (*ādivāsi*) backgrounds.[153] None of the caste groups form a clear majority. A few upper caste

[152] The partition of British India in 1947 gave birth to the Islamic state of Pakistan, which was split into two geographically and culturally distinct zones, West Pakistan and East Pakistan (the present-day Bangladesh, termed East Bengal in the partition). Of the two zones, West Pakistan enjoyed unquestionable political and economic power. The grievances caused by the economic exploitation of East Pakistan led to political discontent and cultural nationalism among East Pakistanis. The Bangladesh civil war broke out 25 March 1971 and East Pakistan declared its independence as the state of Bangladesh. The civil war resulted in massive atrocities against Bengali Hindu intellectuals and women in particular, and led to the flood of approximately eight to ten million refugees into the Eastern provinces of India. The following Indo-Pakistan war later in the same year was an attempt by the Indian leadership under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to end the genocide and solve the refugee problem. Consequently, several million refugees returned to Bangladesh, but an undefinable number remained in different parts of India (see, for example, Saha 2007, 111–120; Togawa 2008; Wolpert 2010).

[153] The number of households was calculated at the time of my fieldwork in 2003. *Ādivāsi* is a Hindi term, which refers to various tribal and ethnic groups that are claimed to be the aboriginals of India. The common family names of Gantians were Mandal (a title of various low castes such as Kaibarttas, Chandals, Goālās, Sunris, Telis, Bāuris), Naskar (a title of Brahmans and Kṣatriẏas but also of a fishing and cultivating caste of Kaibarttas in

Kṣatriẏa families live in concrete houses at one edge of the locality, separated from the others. It is very difficult to trace the exact caste background of Gantians, since most people have shifted away from their traditional occupations and adopted customs and lifestyles different from their origin. The cultivating tribal groups and potter caste are the only ones still practising their hereditary occupation. Separation from the caste traditions has obviously been accelerated by the emigrant experience. The younger generation has more or less abandoned the former customs peculiar to their communities.

Figure 4: Getting ready to celebrate goddess Sarasvatī. In Ganti some are skilled in pottery.

Bengal), Sarkar (a title of Brahmans, but used also by Bengal low castes, Nāpits, Tāntis, Pods), Sardār (a title of various low castes such as Tāntis, Bāgdis, Hāris, Doms), Biswās (a title of various castes involving Vaiśyas, and Kṣatriẏas, and low castes such as Kumhars, Nāpits, Pods). The main tribal groups in Ganti were the Oraons and Mundas (Risley 1998, Vol. I & II).

Some Ganti people found the mixed community uncomfortable, others did not mind. This is what Sada and Alo told about their neighbourhood:[154]

> I do not like it here so much. If I had my own house it would be better. There are not my own people here. People are all mixed together. In my previous place in BG College, it was just my own people there. Here people are good, but it is not the same. (Sada)

> I like this neighbourhood. Everyone talks to each other. No-one is dangerous. (Alo)

Ganti is built on the bank of a canal, which belongs to the Ganges Brahmaputra delta region. The earthen huts of Ganti dwellers line both sides of the road running parallel to the canal. Some huts are rigged up from dried leaves, wood, tarpaulin, and various leftover materials. The environment of Ganti resembles a small village rather than an urban suburb. People have more space to live; there are goats or chickens, trees, greenery, and open spaces. Some families go fishing in the canal, some raise pigs for sale.

A good number of Ganti people, especially tribal groups, were originally agricultural labourers. At the time of my fieldwork some of them continued to work as daily labourers in the fields. Families from fishing and potters' communities were also represented. The majority of the male folk were engaged in working for the various factories or small businesses in the surrounding area of Ganti. The neighbourhood itself hosted a small well ring workshop, clothes factory, and a flower garden. However, these enterprises did not employ many Ganti people. Both the men and women of Ganti were exploited and paid very little for the hard work they did mainly for the advantage of others. The average income of the families was less than in Janbazar and Harijan Basti, and many Ganti families had difficulties covering the costs of most basic needs.

Thirty years of living together as neighbours had moulded Ganti into a community with a particular identity of its own. Since most people originated from different parts of the Bengali region, they shared things in common even though each family and caste group had their own customs and habits as well. Because of their close interaction with one another they gradually began to create new customs distinctive for their neighbourhood. They built temples and a club house, and started to celebrate some religious feasts together as a community.

A good number of Gantians were able – and willing – to participate in common endeavours, to cross the barriers of group lines, and to build contacts with others from different backgrounds. This sort of open-mindedness is possible in lower class neighbourhoods, where control over purity or family conventions is not as strict. In Ganti, women in particular had created a strong alliance with one another and had formed several self-help groups for support. They were also very

[154] Sada was interviewed in her home yard on 1March 2004 and Alo was interviewed on 11March 2004.

active in all kinds of community development initiatives, such as carrying banners and claiming rights for women in celebration of World Women's Day.[155]

Most interviewees were more or less satisfied with the neighbourhood. Some reported drinking and restlessness at nights, but during the daytime women were able to move around and socialize freely. There was a common latrine, but many families used a separate place in their backyard. Water supplies were available from three wells in the neighbourhood. During my fieldwork Ganti was constantly under threat of annihilation. The construction of a highway passing through Ganti was planned, but as of 2008, this plan had not yet been realized.

## 4.2 Kolkata and the influence of the urban environment on immigrant communities

Kolkata is one of the largest and most populated urban agglomerations in India. According to Census of India 2011, roughly 4.5 million people live in Kolkata city whereas the population of Kolkata urban agglomeration totals over 13 million, or even 16 million, if the Howrah and suburbs are included.[156] For centuries Kolkata has been the destination of both national and international immigrants, looking for livelihood and prosperity in the ever-growing metropolis. Kolkata has acted as sanctuary for many people in distress. There are immigrants who have fled from wars, famine and other disasters. Foreign settlers have mainly come from China, Tibet, Afganistan, Armenia, Portugal, and from Bangladesh. Kolkata has also been an important port of illegal immigration. The ever-continuing streams of internal immigrants come primarily from the neighbouring states but also from more distant places all around India. The main minorities in Kolkata are the Biharis and Marwaris.[157] The immigration policy has for centuries been influenced by the communist political system in West Bengal. The Left Front state government has mostly taken a positive stand towards migration and even extended its political support for immigrants – at least during the elections to inflate its vote-bank.

During the initial stage of their arrival, many immigrants face unexpected challenges, and some remain for long periods without permanent shelter. Kolkata pavements, canal banks – basically most open public spaces within the city – host myriads of homeless people with no permanent place to settle. Some immigrants continue this urban nomadism for years, while some remain in

[155] Fieldwork diary, 12 March 2004.

[156] Census of India. According to the provisional population of Census of India in 2011, Kolkata city has a population of 4,486,679. Kolkata city, under the jurisdiction of the Kolkata Municipal Corporation, has an area of 185 sq. km. According to the latest calculation by the India Census, the average population density within Kolkata city is 24, 252 people/sq. km. The Kolkata Metropolitan Area is spread over 1,750 sq. km and comprises 72 cities and 527 towns and villages. The suburban areas of the Kolkata metropolitan district incorporate parts of the districts North 24 Parganas, South 24 Parganas, Howrah, Hooghly and Nadia (Census of India; Kolkata Municipal Corporation; World Association of the Major Metropolises).

[157] Bihar is a state north of West Bengal. The Marwaris come originally from the desert area of Rajastan and belong to a successful merchant community, which nowadays controls almost sixty percent of the assets of Indian industry. They have prospered in Kolkata from the jute and tea industries (Chopra 2001, 103–104).

one spot and establish illegal settlements. The lucky ones end up in the registered slums.[158] One good example of such a neighbourhood is Janbazar, which, since in the course of time it has been established as a registered slum, and those living there are under no immediate threat of being driven away. The community committee has an agreement with the municipal corporation on the access to electricity and water supply and pays for it regularly. The situation is stable as long as the families can pay their rent.

In Harijan Basti some were concerned about the lack of a written document concerning their right to live in the neighbourhood as well as the right to their property. Their community has occupied the area for the past one hundred and fifty years and constructed the houses, but there is no record or agreement about ownership. In Ganti the situation was even worse. The mixed caste refugee colony was built on government land and there was a fear of Kolkata expanding and demolishing squatter colonies such as Ganti. Gantians speculated and worried about how decisions by the local government and other authorities would affect their future. They were not informed by the officials about plans concerning the land, and all kinds of rumours kept spreading. Many of my informants expressed insecurity about their situation.

It goes without saying that leaving the village and place of origin, and settling in a new environment with foreign people and influences have an impact on people and their way of life. At first, most immigrants often coming from backward villages are pleased with the availability of services, education and health care, but at the same time, the new surroundings are also seen as a threat to their traditional lifestyle. This was clearly articulated by my informants. To deal with the threat, communities maintain and even tighten control over their members, especially women. This is exactly what was happening in Janbazar, where families continued observing strict *purdah* even though in the congested city environment it complicated everyday life for women.

If a family had a strong attachment to their native area, they maintained two separate lifestyles. While visiting their place of origin, they returned to old customs, participated in the traditional religious observances and festivities, and visited the local temples and deities; in the city they adapted to new customs and lifestyle – or even gave up religious practices. In Janbazar the acculturation process had clearly started. For example, women had adopted new deities such as Santoṣī Mā and visited a range of healers that were available in the city. City life also had an impact on the families' customs of giving birth. Nowadays most babies are born in hospitals or nursing homes, unlike in the villages. Naturally, the neighbourhood itself also set limits on some traditional customs. Because of lack of space, for instance, it was impossible to be separated from others during the impurity period after childbirth (*ātura/antara*) or after the death of a family member. Some traditional practices were given up because they simply did not make sense in the new environment; these included rites related to agriculture and harvesting.

As many Janbazaris spent part of the year in their native place in Bihar they wanted to maintain the traditional way of life also in the city. Harijan Basti, on its part, had already taken steps to-

[158] Roughly one third of the Kolkata population live in registered or unregistered slums (Kundu 2003, 4).

wards adapting itself to the surrounding multicultural society. Oriyan customs and foreign influences had mixed to the extent that the younger generations had partly lost the sense of their Oriyan identity. They had not only adopted the Bengali and Hindi languages but they were enthusiastic about celebrating the typical Bengali feast Kālī pūjā and the Bihari feast Jiutiyā pūjā. It occurred to me that some were also confused about the names of their deities, and the names had been changed to correspond to those celebrated in the surrounding society. For example, Mā Tāriṇī, the red-faced deliverer and chief presiding goddess of Orissa, had been substituted by Mā Tārā, one of the ferocious bloodthirsty goddesses of Bengali Śāktas. It is difficult to assess whether such changes were intentional or unintentional.

Figure 5: Harijan Basti, originally Oriyan community, celebrates typical Bengali feast Kālī puja.

One motive for lifestyle changes is the hope of ascending from a low social status.[159] The way of life of a whole community changes only gradually, but some young men in Harijan Basti were hoping for even more rapid changes. During various conversations with the youth, it occurred to me that many of them were rebellious about the old customs concerning marriage and family life, and wanted to make their own choices instead of letting their parents decide on their behalf. Young men had been exposed to new ideas through television, movies, and the printed media,

[159] The phenomenon of imitating the lifestyle and customs of upper caste people is called "sanskritization" (Srinivas 1996, 87–88).

which they followed attentively. This brought them into constant conflict with their senior relatives, who still wanted to arrange the young people's marriages and life according to the traditional concepts.

I did not come across similar rebellious attitudes and 'liberal' values either in Janbazar or Ganti. Because of its distant location from the city centre, Ganti was quite isolated from urban influences. The major change from their previous life in Bangladesh or in the villages was that many Gantians had given up their traditional occupation and become employed in the service sector of the surrounding locality. Most Gantians did not seem to have a strong Kolkatan identity. Many of them had neither visited the Kolkata city centre nor had any idea about the general cityscape. Advertisements and television, however, had slowly started to introduce them to city people's lifestyles, as well as to the supplies and services available in the city. Those, however, remained far from their reach. Their attention was directed towards surviving the coming day, week, or month.

The Ganti neighbourhood, unlike Janbazar and Harijan Basti, was not much influenced by the surrounding communities. There was no interaction between Gantians and their upper caste neighbours in the nearby concrete houses. The other immediate neighbourhoods of Ganti were similar mixed refugee colonies having a parallel situation: There was a diversity of cultures within the neighbourhoods themselves. Yet, Ganti did not remain without outside influences. Namely, because of the poverty and low educational standard, the area was fertile land for a range of political and religious missionaries, who regularly came to canvass for their interests. Gantians received them with open arms, in the hope of profiting from them. According to some interviewees, political activism was causing some anxiety and unrest in the area.

## 4.3 Socio-demographic description of the thirty-two interviewees

This chapter will introduce basic socio-demographic factors of my thirty-two interviewees and give background information on the cultures and environments of their communities. The aim is to explain and thus to understand the foundation on which these women base their ideas, attitudes, beliefs, and conceptions of the world – and particularly, their ideas related to mothering.

### Age

The common denominator of the thirty-two women interviewed was motherhood. One interviewee had lost both of her children, but the rest of the women had children still living. The youngest interviewee was twenty-two years old, the oldest in her seventies. The average age of all interviewees was approximately forty-three years. Most of the women, especially the older ones, did not know their exact age, and sometimes their estimations were clearly wide of the mark. Usually they estimated themselves as younger than they actually were. This indi-

cates that either they did not know numbers and basic numeracy or that age did not play a role. Families never celebrated birthdays of the elders. Some mothers said that they cut a cake when a small child has a birthday, but I never witnessed any such occasion. It is possible that the women told me they cut a cake for the birthday, because they had heard about such foreign customs. Age mattered the most when families were planning to marry off their adolescent members. It was important that the groom be older than his bride.

## Marriage

All of the women interviewed had been married at a young age, some of them before attaining puberty, at the youngest, at the age of ten, and at the latest, when they turned eighteen. Brides who had not attained puberty had not settled in their husbands' house immediately, but only after maturing a few years. On the occasion of a new bride finally moving to her in-laws, families celebrated Gaunā, the consummation of the marriage.[160] Some interviewees had started married life at the age of thirteen. Recent marriages, however, were being celebrated later and the marriageable age was clearly rising in each of the three communities. Elderly women, without exception, had married at a younger age than their daughters or granddaughters. Those adolescents who were presently marrying were usually over sixteen, or even eighteen or more. However, it was not rare in each research community to meet young mothers not more than fifteen or sixteen years old already mothering their first-borns. Several women mentioned that they had been taught by municipality health workers and community organizers of the Lutheran World Service that a suitable marriageable age for women nowadays is eighteen and for men twenty-one.[161] This framework was not necessarily accepted by the elders, who were more often than not in a hurry to get their progeny married as soon as possible. Daughters' marriages were hurried even more than sons'. In Ganti, a few young women had continued their studies and thus postponed their marriage. During my second field trip in 2008 they were over twenty and still unmarried, which is undoubtedly an exception within their community.

All Ganti and Janbazar interviewees were married according to the arrangement of their parents and families. The spouses were of the same status and community (*jāti*). Each family was aware of the alternatives for a suitable match. Some women said that their spouses had grown up in the same neighbourhood. One Harijan Basti interviewee, Raji, mentioned that her father and father-in-law had been good friends and that their families lived as neighbours. When their children matured and were to be married off, the fathers decided to marry their children to one another. In contrast, however, most people tended to think that it was better if the spouses had no previous contact; therefore, a suitable match was sought outside their own neighbourhood. The systems of marriage alliances in most South Asian societies and commu-

[160] Fieldwork diary, 11 Jan. 2008; Jacobson 2006, 73. Gaunā was mentioned only by my Janbazari interviewees. There was no mention about a parallel feast either in Harijan Basti or in Ganti.

[161] These are the guidelines given by the Indian Government. The age is decreed by the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955: Section 5: Conditions for marriage (Ahuja 2005, 114; National Portal of India).

nities are complex and regulated, especially among upper caste society, which sees the maintenance of proper marriage alliances as a precondition for continuing the purity of the line.[162] Marriage codes vary to some extent depending on the cultural background and geographical area of the community.[163] In low caste communities the regulations are usually less detailed and less rigid, but they follow a few basic principles. The three communities of this study adhered to at least the following: Firstly, the aim of the marriage is to continue the husband's line (*baṃśa*). Secondly, a marriage alliance is prohibited between families who share blood, which means that there are no marriages within the same line.[164] Thirdly, a preferable marriageable mate is of equal caste or *jāti* status. Generally, closer marriages are more numerous among low castes than high castes; lower castes' marriage ineligibility encompasses a far larger number of people than one's own line.[165] The organization of marriage alliances in different parts of India have been widely studied by several social and cultural anthropologists and sociologists, and the details are far beyond the scope of this study.[166]

In Harijan Basti the traditional organization of marriage had started to break down. Four women out of twelve interviewees admitted that they had married someone they themselves wanted to marry. When women talked about marriage alliances based on affection instead of an agreement between families, always called them by the English term "love marriage".[167]

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[162] See, for example, Ahuja 2005, 112–115.

[163] The general regulation of mate selection in Hindu society can be subsumed under three concepts: endogamy, exogamy, and hypergamy. Endogamy in India refers to the social rule that requires a person to select the partner from within the caste and sub-caste. Exogamy rules forbid marrying a person from the same *gotra* and *sāpiṇḍa*. *Gotra* means family, line, but differs from *baṃśa* in that it also refers to the classification of families in accordance with the names of the saints who founded them. On *sāpiṇḍas* see the following footnote. Hypergamy indicates the practice of seeking a spouse of higher socioeconomic or caste status to benefit from the marriage. Among rural people hypergamy is also seen as an opportunity for modernization. Marrying a daughter to a family living in the city gives her access to modern facilities (Ahuja 2005, 113).

[164] According to the Hindu Marriage Act, 1995, two persons are said to be within the degrees of a prohibited relationship if they are *sāpiṇḍas* of each other. Two persons are *sāpiṇḍas* if one is a lineal ascendant of the other within the limits of a *sāpiṇḍa* relationship, or if they have a common lineal ascendant who is within the limits of a *sāpiṇḍa* relationship. A *sāpiṇḍa* relationship extends as far as the third generation in the line of ascent through the mother, and the fifth in the line of ascent through the father. The line is traced upwards from the person concerned, who is to be counted as the first generation. The *sāpiṇḍa* rule is, however, but a recommendation, which according to the law, should be followed "unless the custom or usage governing each of them permits of a marriage between the two" (National Portal of India). This last statement obviously leaves a wide space for different practices to flourish.

[165] Fruzzetti 1990, 17, 21.

[166] See, for example, Dumont 1954, 1983; Harlan & Courtright 1995; Kapadia 1989; Fruzzetti 1990; Nicholas 1995; Uberoi 1993; Östör & al. 1992.

[167] Dharmaśāstra law texts recognize eight distinct forms of marriages and define which types of marriage are appropriate for each particular caste (*The Law Code of Manu* [*Manusmṛti*] 3.20–35). The most respectful forms of entering into marriage involve parental consent to the marriage alliance and gift-giving between the families of the bride and bridegroom. The four unjustifiable marriage practices comprise *āsura* marriage, selling of a daughter to the highest bidder; *rākṣaṣa* marriage, kidnapping of a girl under precarious conditions such as during a war; *paiśāca* marriage, enticing the girl when she is asleep or unconscious. The fourth form of invalid marriage is *gāndharva,* which is based on mutual affection and love between the husband and wife. *Gāndharva* marriage is characterized by absence of parental control and by the establishment of nuclear families with the husband and wife as equal partners in all endeavours and no children or parents and elders to be looked after. The Hindu Mar-

Regardless of the fact that love marriages are despised and unaccepted throughout most of the society and among most Harijan Basti residents as well, these were becoming more and more popular. Many adolescent men in the neighbourhood were determined to marry according to their personal choice. Girls were also becoming braver. Twenty-two-year old Ru told that she had married for love:[168]

> I was married five years ago. I married against my parents' will. We had loved each other since childhood. We did not understand it then; we were just playing together. My uncle said that it was time for me and my little sister to get married. He said that he would arrange my sister's marriage but not mine. My parents opposed my marriage and that is why I ran away. I am luckier than many are.

Figure 6: In Harijan Basti the traditional organization of marriage has started to break down.

All four Harijan Basti interviewees who had married for love suffered because of more or less complicated relationship with their parents and in-laws. None of the love marriages were accepted or given blessings (*maṅgalkāmanā*) in the form of marriage rituals by the couple's families even though the couples did not violate the norms of an acceptable marriage alliance: None of the four love marriages were inter-caste or inter-religious. Even so, their elders approved only marriages that abided by the conventional rules and right conduct. Fulfilling the

riage Act of 1955 does not take into account these ancient marriage forms, but advocates uncompromising monogamy and suggests certain rules for suitable matches (Pandey 1994, 158–170; Parpola 2005, 169–171).

[168] Ru was interviewed at her home on 2 December 2003.

responsibility of marrying off one's children had an impact on the position of the family within the community hierarchy, and no family wanted to defile their status. Love marriages were a breach of community and caste principles, and thus a threat to the traditional values of the caste society.[169] For this reason and to warn others, the lovers of Harijan Basti were basically deprived of all support, both emotional and financial, by their kin. Usually the couple lived as a separate unit – not as members of a joint family – and had only minimum contact with their families. In some cases, family members would have been willing to accept the self-selected marriage partner of their progeny, but pressure from the surrounding community forced them to reject the lovers.

Harijan Basti interviewee Ru's situation was somewhat exceptional. She had run away from her parents but had been well received by her in-laws, and she enjoyed a friendly relationship with her mother-in-law. Despite the social stigma, most women in love marriages were satisfied with their circumstances and the choice they had made. Only one of the interviewees pondered if the misfortunes of her life had resulted from her 'inappropriate relationship' with her husband. It was clear that a Western researcher was considered a safe person to talk to about love marriages: The women knew that in countries such as I was from, love and personal choice were the usual grounds for marriage. It is reasonable to assume that I was given a slightly more positive impression of the position of those in love marriages than was the case. If the families withdraw their support, it is rather difficult for a young couple to manage the challenges of everyday life.

### Children

Young couples are expected to provide offspring for the family soon after the marriage. Not a single interviewee had intentionally postponed a family. Depending on how old they were when they married, women's first delivery occurred between the age of fifteen and twenty and the rest of the children were also given birth to at a rather young age. Pregnancies of women over thirty were fairly uncommon.

[169] Fruzzetti 1990, 10–11.

Figure 7: New mothers claim that they wish to have two or maximum three children.

Based on my survey, women of the older generation gave birth to more children than younger women in all three communities. One interviewee over sixty had given birth to eleven children. Eight interviewees over fifty had more than seven children. Within a few decades after migrating to a population centre, the number of childbirths had clearly decreased. New mothers claimed that they did not wish to have more than two or maximum three children, depending on the gender of the children. This change in attitudes likely resulted from the lack of physical space as well as women's access to education and various awareness-building programmes. In addition to NGOs, state, and municipal level organizations, an Indian government scheme has been running a large scale campaign and population policy programme in which the central authorities encourage families to have a maximum of two children.[170] Among the lower strata of the society – especially in the rural areas and certain poverty-stricken states – the number is much higher.[171] Among the interviewees the average number of childbirths was 4.5.

Ten mothers out of the thirty-two interviewees reported losing at least one child.[172] Altogether these ten women had lost twenty-five children. One interviewee had seen six of her children

[170] India was in fact the first country in the world to include family planning in the health policy of the government's five year plan in 1951 (Ahuja 2005, 384–385).

[171] Mukherji 2007, 26.

[172] According to UNICEF statistics, the mortality rate of children under five in India was 66 out of a thousand children in 2009. The rate has fallen since 1990, when it was still 118 deaths out of a thousand children

perish one after another. Some women clearly hesitated to reveal the true number of their deceased children, since they were ashamed of not being able to properly take care of them. Abortions of unwanted children, both by legal and illegal methods, are common on all levels of Indian society. The average number in all of India is estimated to be from 1 to 2.6 abortions per woman during her reproductive years. According to a rough estimate, informal providers such as traditional birth attendants, herbalists, magicians, paramedics and faith healers in India perform more than five million illegal abortions per year.[173] None of the interviewed women mentioned that they had had an abortion. The interviews did not systematically cover this question.

Among the interviewees, most child-deaths resulted from diseases such as fever, pox and diarrhoea, and from negligence and lack of resources in treating those diseases. Many children suffered post-natal complications and died of the consequences. Women reported that child-deaths also occurred due to different types of accidents. In some cases, parents did not know the cause of death. Supernatural beliefs and explanations concerning death will be discussed later in more detail. In my sample, there was no correlation between the age of the mother and child mortality: Young and older mothers had lost an equal number of children. Most deaths were obviously connected to the general poverty that regulated the lives of the people I studied.

### Family planning

Young families wanted to limit the number of the children in all three communities. Due to the awareness-building programmes and women's access to municipal health services, most new mothers were introduced to modern methods of family planning and the use of birth control. In principle, women had access to up-to-date methods of birth control, but in practice contraceptive pills and condoms were too expensive for them to purchase. Te lack of proper instruction for their use resulted in some women becoming pregnant while using contraceptive pills. This naturally raised questions about the reliability and effectiveness of the new methods.

Among the interviewees, the main method of birth control was women's sterilization, which for some women had been performed at a rather young age. The family planning policy of India has been criticized for its one-option strategy, which for decades introduced the sterilization of women as the only method of birth control, and at its worst, carried out forced sterilizations of poor, underprivileged citizens in the 1970s.[174] In the present situation, under the threat of population explosion in India, the one-option strategy is still being promoted more or

(UNICEF). Among the women interviewed for this study, the mortality rate of children was much higher than the Indian average.

[173] International Consortium for Medical Abortion.

[174] Ahuja 2005, 383–385.

less. According to a report of the Indian Government Planning Commission, approximately sixty-five percent of those Indian families practising family planning through modern contraceptive methods use female sterilization.[175] However, with the advent of the new millennium the government of India drafted a new population policy. According to the programme, the availability of a variety of modern birth control methods is a right of all citizens. Enforcement of this ideal obviously has tremendous challenges ahead, which was evident in all the three communities under this study. Statistics show that almost forty-five percent of all Indian families have access to modern contraceptive methods, but this obviously is not the case amongst the less-advanced strata of society.[176]

### Literacy and education

Most interviewees belonged to the generation that wanted their children to be educated, although their own parents and elders did not value or accept the education of females. At the time of their childhood and youth, there had simply been no facilities, prospect, or time for "such useless" things: Girls were needed at home to perform household duties and to look after their siblings, and they were needed also to bring in whatever income they could get. According to the common saying, educating a daughter was the same as "putting money into a neighbour's pockets" or, as the common adage says, it is like "watering a flower in a neighbour's garden", since a daughter will be given away in marriage anyway. It was also too expensive to marry off an educated daughter, since according to the common mindset, a wife should always remain less educated than her husband, and parents of well-educated husbands demanded a generous dowry.[177] Educating daughters simply made no sense for traditional families.

[175] In their report the Indian Government Planning Commission relied on the information provided by the International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS). The estimate was from 2002–2004. According to newspaper sources, the popularity of female sterilization is even higher. The highest estimate was 85 percent (see, for example, the article by Tripti Lahiri in The Wall Street Journal, 2010).

[176] UNFPA 2007, 87.

[177] Jeffery & Jeffery 1994, 151.

Figure 8: Girls are needed to assist in household tasks and babysit the younger children.

Among the interviewees were five literate women, all of them from Janbazar. They had studied up to at least fourth grade of elementary school, and thus, had acquired a basic knowledge of reading, writing, and other school subjects. One of them had passed the tenth class and gained a school leaving certificate, which was a rare achievement in a community with a great percentage of illiteracy. The large number of literate interviewees in Janbazar did not give a fully realistic picture of the whole community where many children still lacked a basic education. The literate women were selected for the interviews as a result of their active response to my research endeavours and their courage to talk to an outsider.

Each of the three communities had a few semi-literate women, who had either studied one or two years or taken a course in a non-formal adult education class. They were practically illiterate, but knew some letters and how to sign their name. During my fieldwork period several interviewees actively participated in adult education courses in reading and writing, many with apparent ambition to learn. The rest of the twenty-one women interviewed were fully illiterate, not having any form of basic education. The rate of illiteracy among the interviewees was much higher than the average of all Indian women, which, according to State of World Population 2007, was fifty-two percent.[178]

Figure 9: In the International Women's Day Ganti women march for the girls' rights for education.

[178] Statistics include all women over fifteen years old (UNFPA 2007, 87).

Even though only a few of the interviewees had a personal opportunity to study, most of them had a positive view of education, and struggled hard to provide their children – both boys and girls – with decent schooling. Many of them had a strong faith in a better future through education. Families usually sent all their children to elementary school, but in practice, boys were sent to better schools and encouraged more to continue their studies. They were given more classes in tutoring – a necessary and common method in keeping up with the studies – and if a family had difficulty in covering the school charges, the girls were taken out of school first. The main reason for dropping out of school was that the children were needed to assist in household tasks and babysit the younger children, and to bring in some income for the family. Few families maintained attitudes that girls were not intelligent enough to study. Harijan Basti interviewee Banu reported the school success of her children as follows:[179]

> One of my sons has studied up to seven and one up to class five. My daughter does not know much; she can sign her name. She studied, but it did not help her. It did not enter her mind.

It may be that Banu's daughter was of limited intelligence, but more likely she was a victim of discouragement and so-called girl-bashing.[180] Without the support of her family she had failed to learn. She was condemned to be untalented and consequently had to drop out of her class and quit her studies. On the whole, the education of girls has been gradually seen as not just acceptable but also something people are willing to put effort into. Among the communities studied there were also success stories of adolescent girls who had passed the school leaving exams and entered vocational schooling.

None of the interviewees had a vocational or higher education. However, many of them had participated in some workshops provided by Lutheran World Service India (LWSI), which had given them training in practical skills such as handicrafts and sewing. Some women had been able to utilize these skills and had started small-scale income generating activities. With the support and assistance of LWSI, women had formed savings groups in Harijan Basti and Ganti. Group members collected money once a month into a common account and then gave loans to group members with reasonable interest. This common effort enabled women to get finance, for example, to purchase a sewing machine, or to set up their own shop. Even then, economic advancement followed slowly. It required no less than a change in the attitudes of

[179] Banu was interviewed on 10 March 2004 at her home.

[180] Many surveys show that good number of Indians still maintain strong sexual stereotypes, and parents have different expectations of boys and girls. According to the sexual stereotypes, girls are not expected to orientate themselves towards achievements (see, for example, Geetha 2002, 31–33; Sethi & Allen 1996; Rao & Rao 1996; Das & Ghadially 1996). Sexual stereotypes, according to Das & Ghadially, "refer to [a] constellation of different traits, activities, values, and behavioural characteristics attributed to and used to describe and differentiate two sex groups. […] Boys are encouraged and reinforced to develop masculine characteristics (aggression, dominance, independence, sense of adventure and achievement-oriented) whereas girls are encouraged to acquire feminine characteristics (submissive[ness], nurturance, dependence, less achievement-oriented)" (Das & Ghadially 1996, 124).

the whole society: people were too used to taking advantage of the low caste women and their cheap labour contribution.[181]

Employment

In contrast to the great number of housewives among the upper caste society, most of the low caste interviewees were working or used to work for wages outside the home, or did something at home to earn an income. Their income was necessary to support the family even though they were paid very low wages for hard work. For example, those women who worked as daily labourers in agriculture were paid a lower salary than men doing the same work. According to Ganti interviewee Pal, women were given fifty rupees per day and men sixty.[182]

The attitudes towards women's employment varied considerably between the three communities. Janbazar had a fewer number of employed women than the other two communities, which obviously resulted from their obedience to *purdah* restrictions. Janbazari interviewee Unni was hoping to do something to earn wages, but her husband opposed it:[183]

> I sometimes want to work somewhere, but my husband is against it. If I learned sewing, I might be employed. But I have not learnt it yet. I learned a little, but I was told to quit. My husband told me that it was not necessary.

There are several possible reasons why Unni's husband was against his wife's employment. First, he might have been concerned about violating the *purdah* conventions and having his wife introduced to outside influences. Second, he might have wished to have his wife available whenever he needed her. Third, he might have wanted to free his wife from the burden of the family's economic responsibility and maintained that it was the duty of a husband to support the family. All the men, of course, were not that strict, and some Janbazari women assisted in small shops or did handicrafts. The women with the best paying jobs were all women without husbands – either widows or women deserted by their husbands. Janbazar, being centrally located next to the main market of Kolkata, is a good place to benefit from the masses coming for to shop. One of my interviewees hawked variety of items at a nearby street and another interviewee was a vegetable vendor with her own shop on a street by the market.[184] Both of them worked long hours from very early morning until late at night.

In Harijan Basti most women were employed as housemaids or as cleaners in public premises such as marketplaces or marriage halls. Housemaids usually circulated among several houses during one day. The employers were mainly average middle class people living in flats close

[181] Tandon 1998, 220.

[182] Pal was interviewed on 8 January 2004 at her home in Ganti.

[183] Unni was interviewed on 6 January 2006 at her home in Janbazar.

[184] In this case shop means that she had a small spot reserved for her in the row of hundreds of vegetable sellers.

to the neighbourhood. Due to the status and reputation of the Harijan Basti community, the women were mainly given tasks which were disdained by the rest of the public. The employers would not let them cook, but they were needed to deal with waste, to do dishes, sweep the floors, and wash clothes. One of the interviewees had been employed in a public kitchen, but she was not allowed to touch the food items. She only took care of the waste.[185]

How the women felt about their work as housemaids depended a great deal on the attitude and treatment of the employees for whom they worked. None of the women reported severe ill-treatment.[186] One Harijan Basti interviewee, Sani, told that she had a warm relationship with her employers:[187]

> I work in people's houses. I serve in two houses. They are good people. They love me and consider me as one of them. I get approximately 250–500 rupees per month.[188]

Most women of Harijan Basti were very proud of being wage earners, even though it doubled their workload. Between working hours they rushed to manage the household duties, which took time since everything was done manually. Among the Harijan Basti interviewees, several women were the only family members to bring in some income. Women were used to taking responsibility, and they were also respected for that. They were given an important role in money matters and decision making. Compared to women of Janbazar, who remained in the shadow of their husbands, Harijan Basti women had much more independence. Many adolescent boys in the community seemed to take advantage of their mothers, and asked them for money instead of looking for jobs. Some of my informants experienced frustration because of that.

In Ganti the employment situation had special features, which were explained by the location and composition of the community. As the locality was situated in the northern outreaches of the great Kolkata not too far from agricultural lands, many Ganti inhabitants were employed as daily labourers in paddy fields. Women told that they had to wake up very early to reach the fields in order to get an assignment for the day. Employment was more or less secured

[185] In her study on women's wage work in a Kolkatan neighbourhood Tenhunen notes that cooking was given a higher regard and was better paid than being a maid (Tenhunen 2006, 124). Mattila, in her work on domestic labour relations in India, points out that the work of cook is one of those occupations that directly relate to purity and pollution and thus excites caste considerations. She agrees that "preparing and handling food are tasks which continue to be covered by caste rules", and low caste persons, for the sake of their polluted state, are allowed to handle only uncooked food, if at all (Mattila 2011, 222).

[186] There are a number of low status domestic helpers in India, however, that are not as fortunate. Maids are often as victims of beating and sexual abuse, and targets of rage and anger that cannot be channelled to anybody else in the house. Many also suffer from being forced to isolation at their employers' houses (Mattila 2011, 206–212; Tandon 1998, 102, 220–221).

[187] Sani was interviewed on 10 March 2004 at her home in Harijan Basti.

[188] When my fieldwork was carried out 250–500 rupees corresponded to approximately 4.50–9.50 Euros.

during the active periods of sowing and harvesting, but in between the seasons and during the monsoon, the labourers had to live on their savings.[189]

The surrounding area offered some women other opportunities for employment. One interviewee had worked as a labourer in a flower garden and two women had cooked and cleaned in a nearby school. Within close distance were a range of factories, which also employed women. One Gantian woman had put up a little shop with the support of a loan granted by the savings group.

Several Ganti women were recruited by a Bangladeshi tobacco company to tie local tobacco (*bidi*) for wages. They worked for the middlemen who provided them with the tools and raw materials. The women were able to do the job at home, and they were paid three rupees (which equalled six Euro cents at that time) for every set consisting of a thousand pieces. They could finish four thousand *bidi* per day at the most. In 2008, their wage was raised to four rupees per thousand pieces.[190] The rise in salary did not, however, follow the general increase in prices. As the basic supplies were more expensive, the women in reality had less money to cover everyday expenses than before. Not only was the salary poor, but the monotonous work was exhausting both physically and mentally. For most women, however, there was no choice; every cent was needed and they had no opportunity to get a better job.[191]

Some Ganti women were able to utilize their skills in sewing and handicrafts to carry on a small-scale business. Several women stitched sari blouses to order.[192] Asha had learned to stitch local quilts (*kanthā*):[193]

> I am doing some stitching. I sew quilts. I can even make designs. I get eighty or seventy rupees per one quilt. People give orders to me. I sew for almost everyone in one village outside Kolkata. I know everyone there. There are also relatives.

[189] Fieldwork diary, 24 September 2003.

[190] Fieldwork diary, 11 January 2008.

[191] The exploitation of Ganti women resembles the situation of numerous other low caste women throughout India, as reported, for example, by Tandon 1998, 221–229.

[192] Low caste women are often exploited as business partners and they are paid less for the same work and goods. For example, for sewing a sari blouse, women were paid ten to twelve rupees per piece. A tailor would have charged many times more depending on the shop.

[193] Asha was interviewed at her home on 16 February 2004.

Figure 10: Several Ganti women were recruited by a Bangladeshi tobacco company to tie local tobacco.

## Widowhood

Ten women out of thirty-two interviewees were widows. One lost her husband during my fieldwork and one had been deserted by her husband several years before. According to the women, the main reasons for the loss of their husbands were heavy drinking habits, accidents, various diseases, and the lack of money for proper treatment. Widows clearly outnumbered widowers, especially in Ganti and Harijan Basti. The most probable explanation for the imbalance was the unhealthy lifestyle of many men. At the preliminary stage of this study, I had no intention of including so many widows in the study, but in the course of the fieldwork it occurred to me that elderly women were excellent sources of information because of their lengthy personal history and experience. They could also spare more time for interviews than younger women, who were fully involved in earning wages and taking care of their households and children. Widows could also speak freely because they did not have to think about the consequences.

In the communities under my study widowhood was not such a social stigma as it is in parts of the upper caste society in India.[194] Some widows said that other women criticized their participation in performing rituals and wanted to limit their freedom, but none of the widows were rejected by their family – the traditional fate of widows, who used to be thrown out of their homes into the streets to beg for their living. This can still be witnessed in the streets of modern Kolkata. A number of widows crowd around the entrances of temples and subways to beg for their survival. In the low caste communities of this study, widows adhered to neither the traditional dress codes nor the eating restrictions for widows. They stopped wearing vermilion on their hair parting (*sindūra*) and bangles, the signs of a married woman, and they often dressed in less colourful clothes and wore less jewellery, but other than that, widows shared life with others. Janbazar interviewee Tili had been a widow for ten years, and she described the circumstances of a widow as follows:[195]

> In Bihar there are no dress code restrictions for widows. There is freedom to wear colourful saris and dress accompaniments, bangles, and to apply colour on your feet (*āltā*) and hands.[196] But since I do not have the age, I have discarded wearing colourful dresses. I have been wearing white since my widowhood. I do not prefer colourful garments anymore. It is neither proper for me, nor have I the age now. […] In the old days widows wore white saris with thin borders of red or some other colour. Now widows wear all types of saris. In the village one sees widows wearing more coloured saris than white ones. In Bihar it is customary for a young widow to go back to her parents. And if

[194] Jacobson 2006, 71.

[195] Tili was interviewed on 20 March 2004 in Unni's house in Janbazar.

[196] *Āltā* is a red coloured dye for women to decorate their feet. Hands are often decorated with henna designs. The colour red is thought to symbolize fertility.

> the girl is young, she has to be given in marriage again. There is no rule against marrying her off again if she does not have children.

In Harijan Basti, Sani, one of the widowed interviewees said that she lived like everyone else, except that she did not wear the colour red:

> I eat everything. Among the Orissa people we eat everything. Bengalis have restrictions. I do not wear red clothes, or anything red like *sindūra,* nail polish or *āltā*. There is a period of thirteen or fifteen days when you should not be with others. Some wear white. It is becoming more common for widows to marry again. My husband died, but if he sees that I am getting married again […] No, I am not going to do it. My sons are telling me, look mother, how difficult it has been for us, please, get married.

Even though the remarriage of a widow has been a legal option since 1856, it is still a delicate and debated issue in Indian society. The traditional views are changing at a slow pace.[197] The Muslim community has been more tolerant and they even consider remarrying desirable, even though a widow's status as the second or third wife of her husband is not held in high regard.[198] Regardless of the fact that a widow's remarriage is more common and accepted in low ranking society, none of my widowed interviewees had married again.

## 4.4 Position of women within the family and community in light of the fourfold structure of human goals (*puruṣārtha*)

Discussing the position of low caste women in India is puzzling. Being born of low caste and a woman is generally thought to be double burden in the patriarchal society which sees people as fundamentally unequal. In the introductory chapter of this study I stated that this stereotypical thinking should be challenged. The position of women seems somewhat different from the insider's point-of-view. My research material suggests that within their communities, women are valued and respected. In addition, many of the female informants – particularly in Ganti and Harijan Basti – had relatively more independence than the majority of women in the traditionally oriented upper caste society. On average, women were free to move, to work for wages, and to participate in decision making. Women had an active role in conducting domestic and life cycle rituals to the extent that they could even acquire a position of religious authority, which among the upper castes is usually a priority of professional priests.[199] The other side of the coin is that the independence involved more responsibility and hard work for

[197] Tandon 1998, 142–145. The traditional ideal of the Hindu widow is to commit *satī*, immolation of herself in her husband's funeral pyre. The execution of *satī* is still to some extent idealized, but nowadays rarely put into practice (Jacobson 2006, 71; Mani 1989, 88–126; Narasimhan 1998, 1–8). There are also examples of widows taking active societal and political roles in their community and of widows who have attained saintly status (see, for example, Wadley 1995b, 225).

[198] Tandon 1998, 137.

[199] Altekar 1995, 203–206.

women. In Ganti and Harijan Basti women played an especially important and active role in bringing in income and thus maintaining the family.

Understanding low caste women's status requires examining and reflecting on it in the context of the general duties and ideals of the castes. According to several scholars, the value and position of a Hindu woman depend on the life orientation and dominant ideology of a caste.[200] Each caste and community is to fulfil a certain innate duty to maintain the right order of the whole (*varṇāśrama-dharma*).[201] According to Michael Allen, the four human goals (*puruṣārthas*) stated in the Hindu tradition, as well as related ideologies peculiar to Hindus produce a different view of women.[202] Liberation (*mokṣa*) and the right order (*dharma*) are innate goals for the people of high castes whereas lower castes tend to pursue primarily material prosperity (*artha*) and pleasure (*kāma*). This rough division is obviously an over-simplification, and it could be argued that most Hindus aim at more than one of them – or even all of them – at different stages of life. However, the division provides a hypothesis for examining the position of women in terms of the four traditional human goals.

In the course of Indian history, the pursuits of liberation (*mokṣa*) and right order (*dharma*) have resulted in several practices that subordinate and devalue women. The ascetic ideals conceive of women mainly as a distraction and hindrance on the way to higher spirituality and liberation. Liberation itself is not attainable for most women, who are bound to nature and periodical impurity by their biology and duty to procreate. Instead, their sexuality threatens and tempts the ascetics who have renounced their bodily desires. Those aiming at keeping the right order see women as potentially harmful and polluting, but when carefully administered they are important and necessary instruments in maintaining the order. Such conventions have resulted in strict control over women who have had to carefully abide by the purity codes and orders, and thus, have been forced into a repressive position. In the course of history the purity ideals have contributed to the emergence of oppressive practices such as child marriage and widow burning (*satī*).[203]

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[200] Allen 1990, 1; Kelkar 1995, 37; Krygier 1990, 81, 93; Young 1987, 64.

[201] *Varṇāśrama-dharma* is a Sanskrit term.

[202] Allen 1990, 1–19. The pursuit of the four goals of human life *artha, dharma, kāma* and *mokṣa* was shaped in the Dharmaśāstra treatises and the epics of *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*. The fourfold structure was preceded by the three categories of possible human goals. *Dharma* is to confirm and maintain the proper order and purity of one's family and society. *Artha* is to attain wealth and prosperity. The goal of *kāma* is to seek pleasure and satisfaction. The goal of *mokṣa* was added later to the original three. *Mokṣa,* liberation from the cycle of rebirths (*saṃsāra),* is believed to be possible only for ascetics adhering to the life of renouncer (*sannyāsī*) (Grimes 1996, 251–252; Lipner 1999, 159–160).

[203] Allen 1990, 6–7. The status of women in India can be approached from various angles, each of which produce a different view on the topic. Most scholars agree that the position of women has deteriorated continually through different periods of Indian history. The literal sources show that in early Vedic (1600–1000 BCE) times women were active participants in the sacrificial rites of Vedic religion along with their husbands. They were also equal owners of households and property. Rigidity regarding gender roles developed during the post-Vedic period (1000–350 BCE). The initiator was the ascetic tradition, which excluded women from official religious practices and identified them with sexuality, impurity, desire, and embeddedness in the material world – all of which had to be renounced by the liberation-seeking ascetic. This worldview afforded an opportunity for the development of a discriminatory attitude to women due to their biological functions. As the pure/impure dichotomy grew in importance, women were increasingly perceived as impure, especially during menstruation and the period following childbirth. Many restrictions and rules were formed because of the concern for women's purity,

In Hindu society, according to Allen, there are additional sets of values that are the exact inverse of ascetic renunciation and promote a fully different approach to women. These life affirming values appreciate conjugal family life, as against celibacy, the positive reproductive value of sexuality, as against its impurities and temptations, and the material advantages of fertility.[204] Those cultivating the values of abundant prosperity (*artha*) and sensual pleasure (*kāma*) see women as a vital source of all well-being and wealth. Women are valued especially for their capacity to produce children. They also provide labour for acquiring property, and moreover, they are a potential source of divine energy (*śakti*), which they can utilize in pursuing worldly goals. Allen thus distinguishes three positive components that provide a basis for the value of women: Women are sources of purity, power, and productivity. According to his view, positive attitude is more visible among the low caste communities, and thus the position of women both in terms of status and autonomy is relatively better the lower one descends the social and caste hierarchy.[205] In line with Allen's view, the women studied were understood as important agents of life affirming values, in Harijan Basti and Ganti in particular. Based on this research it can be easily agreed that women were seen as sources of purity, power and productivity of their families.

## 4.5 Low caste: does it exist?

### Origin of the caste division

In applying for a research visa for the fieldwork in India I was given the advice by senior researchers not to mention that I was studying low castes, Dalits, untouchables, or anything referring to the problematic nature of the caste issue in general. I was told that several researchers who had openly revealed their interest in caste in visa applications had encountered various difficulties with Indian authorities during their research work. When learning of my field of

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and the status of women declined. The age for marriage gradually decreased, since the pre-pubertal marriage became the guarantee of female loyalty and chastity. Women's sexuality was rigorously controlled. Babyboys were preferred over girls to the point that infant girls were killed in secret. The introduction of the dowry custom added to the disfavour of daughters. Various restrictions for widows and the prohibition of widows' remarriage became widespread, and the practice of widow burning increased in popularity. At the same time women's access to Vedic education was challenged, and gradually women were denied active participation in the ritual performance. The decline of women's status is manifested in parts of the literary corpus of Dharmaśāstras, particularly in Smṛtis and Purāṇas, which portray an ideal woman, *pativratā*. *Pativratā* means a vow (*vrata*) of protecting a husband's health and life. Central to this vow is a wife's unquestionable loyalty, devotion, and service to her husband, who is her god. In the course of history the *pativratā* ideal encroached on the autonomy of Indian women to the extent that they were primarily seen as the wives of their husbands and mothers of their children who were to pursue virtues such as self-sacrifice, chastity, and dependence (Basham 1997, 177–179; Dhruvarajan 1989, 26–30; Jain 2003, 84–87; Mukherjee 1994, 5; Narayanan 1990, 70; Sherma 2002, 26–28; Young 1999, 235–236). I want to emphasize that seeing Indian history as the gradual deterioration of women's status is one approach on the topic. The portrait may not look quite the same if one considers the development of Goddess worship and implications involved with it, for example, or if the topic is discussed in the light of the folk traditions and oral history.

[204] Allen 1990, 8–11.

[205] Allen 1990, 17–18; Krygier 1990, 81, 93.

interest, the reaction of some Indian academics was equally sceptical: Why do you want to study low castes? We have an exquisite cultural tradition in India; why have you selected to study low caste communities?[206] These attitudes, among others things, expose the fact that caste at many levels of Indian society is still a complex, controversial, and sensitive issue. It puzzles the minds of not only academics, politicians, and civil activists, but also the general populace struggling with the questions of basic human rights in everyday situations.[207]

Debates over the origin, the development, and the future of the hierarchical stratification of Indian society into castes continue, and there is by no means a general consensus on the issues. As the term caste itself is an imported product, some argue that the caste system is a foreign invention and enforced by foreigners, and thus should be denounced and replaced by indigenous social categories.[208] In the various definitions applied to the term caste, most scholars have agreed that caste is a hereditary social group that is characterized by endogamy, ranking according to birth, and specific norms which regulate social interaction.[209] One of the main contradictions in the arguments concerns the relationship of one caste towards other castes. Some consider castes primarily as introverted groups that, in line with Célestin Bouglé, "repel rather than attract each other", whereas others emphasize that each caste though a separate unit is closely involved with and dependent on other castes in the network of economic, political, and ritual relationships (Bouglé 1971, 9). However, both aspects are necessary for understanding the implications of caste. In his early writings Yogendra Singh holds that the caste system simultaneously displays two tendencies: segmental and organic.[210]As segmental reality, on the one hand, each caste tends to articulate mutual repulsion, social distance, and inequality, but on the other hand, as an organic system, the caste segments are mutually interlinked by the principle of reciprocity. Singh's view can be taken as justifying the functioning of caste in practice, even in modern society.

[206] The critique and unease of some Indians regarding my research topic is understandable: Who would want an outsider to explore the 'filthy backyard of your chateau'? It is a question of one's national pride.

[207] The caste issue – especially the position of people belonging to the lowest category of Indian society – has recently been increasingly on view, also in the international media. Civil activists all around the globe demand the abolition of caste discrimination and equal rights for those who have been despised for the sake of their birth. Civil activism against caste discrimination has also been organized in Finland, where the Network of Dalit Solidarity was formed in 2010 (see International Dalit Solidarity Network; Ahuja 2005, 33; Sen 2005, 207–208).

[208] The term caste originates from the Spanish and Portuguese word *casta*, which again derives from the Latin term *castus,* 'chaste', 'pure', 'cut off', 'segregated'. The term was applied to Indian social groups by Portuguese invaders starting from the 17th century. According to Chatterjee, "the Portuguese word 'caste' should be avoided" and replaced by "the Sanskrit words which were used by the ancients to describe the social grouping" (Chatterjee 1996, 16). In recent scholarship on India criticism of the caste system is directed to British rulers who are accused of installing caste into a central position within Indian civilization. The British considered caste as an essence of India, which was profoundly different from European society (Inden 1990, 56–66; Inden 2000, 56–66; Mendelsohn & Vicziany 2000, 1–2).

[209] See, for example, Ahuja 2005, 35–36; Béteille 1965, 46; Bouglé 1971, 7–10; Dumont 1980; 21; Dutt 1968, 2–3; Hutton 1961, 49; Ketkar 1979, 15; Risley 1915, 67.

[210] Singh 1974, 319.

While the term caste is a foreign import, *varṇa* categorization of people was introduced in the early Sanskrit scriptures.[211] *Varṇa* indicates the division of the society into four social orders or classes based on the division of labour.[212] The concept of *varṇa* has also been linked with the racial factor: Aryans and non-Aryans and different *varṇas* were distinguished in respect of skin colour and race.[213] The scripturally authoritative fourfold *varṇa* system has been considered as an ideal model of Hindu society in which ranked classes constitute a unity, and each class has a different function necessary to sustain the whole.[214] There is ongoing debate and confusion as to how *varṇa* is connected to caste, and on the other hand, is distinct from it.[215] According to Ahuja, "the origin of castes has nothing to do with *varṇas,* though in the process of development of castes, they came to be associated with *varṇas*" (Ahuja 2005, 39). In other words, the hierarchy and mobility of caste was stated in *varṇa* terms and fitted into the *varṇa* framework. In practice, particularly in village India, the term caste has been connected to and understood as a synonym for the indigenous Sanskrit term *jāti,* which means birth and race. The relation of caste and *jāti*, however, is not altogether fixed, since the composition of caste and *jāti* themselves is not fixed.[216] *Jātis* are often considered as sub-castes, and the other way around, caste is understood as a collection of *jātis* that share an occupational status and ethnic history.[217]

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[211] *Ṛgveda* mentions two *varṇas,* Ārya and Dāsa, and the division of society into three orders, Brahma (priests), Kṣatra (warriors), and Vis (common people). Ārya and Dāsa are claimed to refer to the Aryans and the people subdued by the Aryans. According to Parpola, Dāsas were a group of Indo-Iranians who initially rejected the Aryan religion but later merged with it (Parpola 1988; 2005, 33). Prabhati Mukherjee portrays the Dāsas as a group that constantly came into conflict with the Aryans, who considered the Dāsas as sub-humans due to their ethnic appearance and dark complexion. Wealthy Dāsas inhabited several towns, owned fortresses, and to the annoyance of the Aryans, had control over some main sources of drinking water. Among the Aryans' enemies were a number of different groups such as Dasyus (there is no scholarly consensus on whether Dasyu equals Dāsa), Rākṣasas, Paṇis, and Asuras, to name but a few. However, their worst and most formidable enemy was the Dāsas (Mukherjee 2002, 17–20). Most scholars hold that the emergence of the fourth *varṇa* Śūdras is based on the grouping together of various heterogenous groups that Aryans considered inferior to themselves. The hierarchical four *varṇa* order was established in the Brahmanical period along with the writing of the Brāhmaṇas and Upaniṣads. Brahman superiority developed hand in hand with Brahman responsibility for the performance of Vedic sacrifice. As the priesthood became hereditary Brahmans started to pay attention to the purity of blood, and thus attaining superiority over others. The hierarchical system and inequality was further confirmed in the Post-Mauryan period through the formation of *Manusmṛti*, which allowed Brahmans a number of privileges and imposed various restrictionson the Śūdras. The three upper orders have later been considered as the twice-born castes (Ahuja 2005, 44–45; Risley 1998, Vol I, xxxvi–xl).

[212] According to the Vedic myth recorded in the *Puruṣasūkta* hymn, the division of society was created by the gods from the body of the primal man Puruṣa (*Ṛgveda* RV.X.90.12 and *Atharvaveda* AV.XIX.6.6) From his head sprang Brahmans, the scholarly community including priests and holy men. From his arms Kṣatriẏas, the community of rulers and warriors. From his thighs Vaiśyas, the merchants and artisans. And from his feet Śūdras, the servants of the other three (Bowker 1997, 1015).

[213] According to Risley – who was among the first to recognize the significance of race as a foundation of the caste system – "the motive principle of Indian caste is to be sought in the antipathy of the higher race for the lower, of the fair-skinned Aryan for the black Dravidian" (Risley 1998, xxxviii).

[214] Srinivas 1996, 95–97; Zelliot 1998, 94. For example, Mohandas 'Mahatma' Gandhi maintained that the idea of *varṇa* as an all-India framework forms the basis of the uniform culture of Hindu society.

[215] Chatterjee 1996, 15–16.

[216] One of the main scholars studying mobility in the caste system is Srinivas (1962, 1996, 1998). In the course of history, several caste communities have had an ambition to move upwards in the caste ranking. To rise in status they have used a variety of methods: conquering territories through warfare, serving rulers, and becoming active in politics, thus claiming a higher status for a group. Low castes have also registered under higher status in census enumerations carried out during British rule. Recent westernization has also had an impact on caste iden-

According to a number of social analysts, the fundamental categories in Hindu social thought are purity and pollution, as well as mastery and servitude.[218] Hence, the position of a caste – if it is to be master or to serve others – is determined and ranked by the degree of its purity and impurity. The three upper *varṇas* obviously rank at the top and hold the position of mastery, whereas the fourth *varṇa* is ordered to serve others due to the stigma of its natal impurity. It is claimed that each person or group possesses some capacity to pollute others and to become polluted, either permanently or temporarily, through transactions with more polluted beings, objects, or events. This belief has had a tremendous influence on the people of the lowest ranks of Indian society, who have been accordingly labelled and treated as untouchables.[219]

In recent sociological studies of India the existence of a hierarchy of purity has been challenged and the caste issue has been approached increasingly from the viewpoint of casteism, castes claiming their identity and rights.[220] Dipankar Gupta contends that to argue that castes obey the hierarchy of purity is archaic; instead, castes ought to be viewed as "a plethora of assertive caste identities, each privileging an angular hierarchy of its own" (Gupta 2004, x). Gupta addresses his critique particularly to Dumont whose idea of pure hierarchy "has failed to see that each caste valued itself very high and had deep pockets of ideological inheritance from which it could draw continuous symbolic energy for the both political activism and economic competition" (Gupta 2004, x–xi). Based on my research material, I agree that at least two out of three communities participating in this study clearly had a group identity and they drew from an "ideological inheritance" of their own, but at the same time, they suffered from quite a low self-esteem. This became obvious, for example, from their comments describing their environment. In my view, caste identity, while to some extent a source of symbolic energy, still is an encumbrance for people participating in politics or economic competition.

There is no denying that the discrimination of certain groups of people because of their polluted status continues to be enforced even in modern Indian society. My study among the low caste neighbourhoods affirms that the inequality of people in India is so ingrained in the social code

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tities. The most common method to move upwards has been to absorb habits and ways of life of castes of higher ranking. The phenomenon is called "sanskritization". According to Srinivas, it is a process in which a low caste takes over the customs, rituals, beliefs, ideology, and lifestyle of a higher caste, and wishes to elevate their status accordingly. The process is usually slow, and a permanent change in status and attitudes takes several generations (Srinivas 1996, 87–89). It also worth noting that the possibility of advancement of a person in the caste hierarchy is also recorded in the Dharmaśāstra law books. According to *Manusmṛti*, the *varṇa* division is not irreversibly fixed by birth. Instead, progression to a higher class is possible within seven generations if the offspring of a man of higher rank and a woman of lower rank has children with a superior partner (*The Law Code of Manu* [*Manusmṛti*] 10.64–65).

[217] Mendelsohn & Vicziany 2000, 6.

[218] Baker 1991, 45–48; Bouglé 1971; Das 1997a, 74–75; Dumont 1980, 43, 47; Inden 1985, 176; Kolenda 1997, 78–94; Srinivas 1996, 124–125.

[219] For recent works on the untouchables, see Deliège 1997, 1999; Mahar 1998; Mendelsohn & Vicziany 2000; Michael 1999; Moon 2000; Mukherjee 2002; Rao 2009.

[220] See, for example, Gupta 2000, 2004; Khare 2009; Parish 1996; Quigley 1993; Searle-Chatterjee & Sharma 1994.

and manifested so subtly in countless everyday encounters that most people neither recognize it nor call it into question. According to the unwritten code of social behaviour, people know from which shops their family should purchase everyday supplies; which neighbourhoods to avoid; who are to clean their toilets; who are suitable playmates and marriageable partners for their children, and so on.[221] Even though caste discrimination has been prohibited by Indian law since 1950, the caste reference holds and continues influencing a person's choice of occupation, diet, spouse, and collective rank in relation to other caste groups.[222] The people in the three low caste research neighbourhoods studied were conscious of their ranking in the society. At the same time they knew how to win some respect from the society: to get educated, clean up the neighbourhood, avoid using intoxicants, and behave decently.

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[221] During the fieldwork my family lived in an apartment in a traditional Bengali middleclass neighbourhood. We had a male domestic helper from a Muslim community, who assisted us in doing everyday chores at home. His duties involved wiping the floors, washing clothes, and occasionally cutting vegetables for cooking. One task that he never did was cleaning the bathroom. It simply did not seem to belong to his duties. Namely, someone else did the job. A very dark-complexioned man was hired to scrub the toilets for each apartment in our part of the neighbourhood. He came in saying not a single word, nor did he pay any attention to us. We never heard his name nor where he came from; he just did his job and left silently. That was what was expected of him, being as invisible as possible. Similarly to this toilet cleaner, it is expected that a person be conscious of his or her standing in relation to others, and behaves accordingly.

[222] Article 15 in The Constitution of India (1949) prohibits discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth. However, it is noteworthy that The Constitution does not prohibit the caste system as such. Persistence of caste does not mean that it was not moulded in the course of historical currents. The antipathy towards the rigidity of caste and priestly domination was first clearly expressed in medieval poetry starting from 600 AD. Several poet saints (starting from Tamil Vaiṣṇava Ālvārs and Śaiva Nāyanārs), some themselves untouchables, denounced caste and preached equality of all people. The following devotional current (most influential from the 11th to the 16th centuries) which is called the Bhakti tradition, rejected institutionalised forms of religion in favour of an immediate experience of the divine. It maintained that caste and gender did not matter as regards devotion and final salvation.

The Bengal region was one of the strongholds of the Bhakti devotion and a nurturing soil for one of the most influential Bhakti currents, Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, which attracted followers from all the caste groups, including the low castes. Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas revere the teachings of the Bengali saint Kṛṣṇa Caitanya and focus their devotion on Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā (Broo 2003, 33; McDaniel 1989, 1–3; Mendelsohn & Vicziany 2000, 22; Roy 1975, 3–4; Sur 1992, 95–97). The Bhakti movement, if only influential in shaking the foundation of social inequality, could not destroy the rigid caste system. Neither could the various social reform movements (Brāhmo Samāj, Ārya Samāj, and Rāmakrishna Mission, to name but a few) in the early 20th century, which fought for the abolition of caste and caste-based restrictions concerning marriage, dining, and social interaction, and advocated the universalisation and brotherhood of man.

It is generally agreed that the caste system has most severely been affected by the process of industrialization and urbanization starting from the 1920s and 1930s. The growth of cities, and the anonymity, congestion, secularization, and mobility of city life have unavoidably had an effect on the operation of caste (Ghurye 1961, 202; Srinivas 1962, 85–86). At present, according to Ahuja, caste is influenced at least by the "merger of various states, enactment of several laws, spread of education, socio-religious reform measures and movements, westernization, modern professions, spatial mobility, and the growth of the market economy" (Ahuja 2005, 48).

There are basically two views on the future of caste: First, the caste system is thought to be under a rapid change and becoming weaker, although it is not being abolished or destroyed. Second, the caste system, while gradually changing is not believed to be transforming itself fast. The first view is supported, for example, by Majumdar 1958; Kolenda 1997b; Srinivas 1978, 1998. Scholars such as Ghurye 1961; Dumont 1980; Béteille 1965, 2003; Gould 1988; Singh 1974, 1983 represent the second view. The rising trend concerning caste has been called casteism, which refers to the favouring of members of one's own caste and sub-caste in appointments and promotions. Castes have become conscious of their power and rights. The tendency of castes to attempt to dominate others has influenced the increase of inter-caste conflicts in Indian society (Ahuja 2005, 63; Gupta 2004, x).

What are low castes?

This study is of low caste women, but what is meant by a low caste? Who belong to it? Why is the concept applicable and justifiable in the context of this study? In the *varṇa* framework, Śūdras, the servants, rank the lowest, though they have never been a homogeneous unitary group. Within each of the four main castes are countless sub-castes.[223] Thus, numerous groups and sub-groups exist within the Śūdras, and among them, the lowest Śūdra sub-castes are thought to be fit for the defiling menial tasks rejected by others. These lowest of the Śūdra sub-castes used to be scorned as untouchables by the upper caste society. In addition to the lowest Śūdras, there are also other untouchable groups who on the whole do not fit into the *varṇa*-based caste system, and thus remain excluded from the caste society.[224] However, these outcastes are also organized in hierarchies. In this study 'low caste' refers to those groups of people who were formerly identified as untouchables; they comprise the lowest Śūdra sub-castes and those outside the caste structure. The three communities selected for this study belong to this lowest rank of Indian society, which, being an extremely diverse group, is difficult to adequately categorize. In the course of history they have been recognized by a number of names, and defined in various terms, but for the sake of simplicity, they are here referred to as low castes.[225]

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[223] Srinivas 1996, 95–97.

[224] In addition to untouchable groups, a large number of different tribal and ethnic groups exist outside the *varṇa* system; they do not fit into any recognized category. Nowadays these groups are referred to as Scheduled Tribes.

[225] Low caste as 'a type of people' was invented in the late colonial period, mainly the twentieth century (Mendelsohn & Vicziany 2000, 2). Yet, the groups that are now called low castes have a long history best understood by the attributes and names by which they are referred to. In what follows, I will briefly summarize the development of different terms that low caste people have been referred to in the course of Indian history. The roots of discrimination lay already in the Aryan invasion. Northern invaders considered themselves as superior and called non-Aryans non-humans (*amanuṣya*). They looked down on the appearance of the Non-Aryans and called them names such as dark-skinned (*kṛṣṇā varṇa*) and those without a nose (*anāsā*).

In *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, the most degraded of all mortals – those inferior even to animals – were referred to as *caṇḍāla*. They were unfit to receive the leavings from the plate of others (Chatterjee 2002, 36–37). In Dharmaśāstras, particularly in *Manusmṛti*, the *varṇa* order received its classic definition. The lowest ranks of people were identified either as the fifth order or those outside the four *varṇas* (*avarṇa*), or with derogatory names such as untouchable (*aspṛśya*) or dog-eaters (*śvapacas*). In the late Vedic text *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa*, law giver Baudhāyana introduces the term *mlēccha*. According to him, *mlēccha* is a kind of barbarian who eats meat, indulges in self-contradictory statements, or is devoid of righteousness and purity of conduct (Chatterjee 2002, 56). As low caste people's diet included meat, *mlēccha* was taken into use to mark these people.

The term *pariah* derives from the Tamil name of an untouchable drummers' caste. The term *pariah* shifted into the English language during the colonial period as a synonym for the socially ostracised and morally depraved. In reaction to the foul names, attempts were made to elevate the status of the low caste by giving them respectable names. Untouchable leaders employed the original prefix (*ādi*) into the names of different regional groups as early as 1917 to indicate that low caste people were original inhabitants subordinated by Aryan immigrants. The terms *ādi-drāviḍa* and *ādi-andhra* are still used as self-description by large numbers of untouchables in the different states of South India.

In 1933 Mahatma Gandhi adopted the term "people of God" (*Harijan***)** as he wanted to invent a name that identified the relevant people without fixing them with an inferior status. However, many low caste people considered the term patronizing. Another historically charged term is *Dalit*, a Marathi word, which literally means ground, broken or reduced to pieces. It was first used in the context of caste oppression by the nineteenth century reformer Phule, but its modern history dates from the early 1970s, when it was used among activists from the untouch-

Although positioning people as low or high was not, according to scriptures, an original purpose of the *varṇa*, defining the untouchables as low is in many respects valid in the contemporary situation. Namely, despite the recent development as regards caste identities in Indian society, low caste people are still the lowest – materially most deprived, most exploited, and least educated – section of the Indian society. At present they are officially called Scheduled castes and make up approximately 16 percent of the Indian population.[226] The majority of the low caste people live in villages and depend on agriculture. In city environments they usually provide a cheap labour force for the upper caste society. According to the 2001 Census of India, approximately 54.7 percent of the total Scheduled caste population were literate; of the women 41.9 percent.[227]

In this study the concept of low caste has been selected on the basis of its generalizability.[228] The term low caste expresses something that the three communities under my study have in common; they rank low in the hierarchy of castes. However, the term avoids many of the connotations that the various other names given for the group have had. Some of the women interviewed identified themselves as belonging to a low caste (*antyaja*), but the foreign term caste rarely occurred in their discourse.[229] When women talked about their community or neighbourhood, they referred to it as "our own people" (*nijer lok*) and occasionally by the term *jāti*, the common operative concept of caste.[230]

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able Mahar caste. The term is intensely political and although it is now quite widespread, it still has deep roots in a tradition of political radicalism inspired by the figure of B. R. Ambedkar.

In addition, some terms have been created mainly for the use of bureaucracy. The terms outcastes, depressed castes, and exterior castes were devised in British bureaucratic contexts from the late 19th century to the 1930s. The endpoint of this conceptual development is the name Scheduled castes, now the official identifier of the untouchables. The schedule was originally promulgated by the British Government of India in 1936, but the term became widely used after the independence of India. The so-called 'schedule' is a list of castes entitled to parliamentary seats, public employment, and special educational benefits. This government attempt to deal with the problems confronting the Scheduled castes is called protective discrimination. The Schedule caste rights are recorded in The Constitution of India. Finally, one of the least attractive terms referring to low caste people is ex-untouchables, which was often used in the early years of Indian independence (on low castes, see, for example, Aktor 2000, 136; Basham 1997, 144–145; Dushkin 1998, 168–169; Mendelsohn & Vicziany 2000, 2–5, 17; Michael 1999, 12–17; Shrirama 1999, 40–42).

[226] Census of India.

[227] Census of India: State/Sex-wise Literacy Rate of Scheduled Castes in India (Census 2001).

[228] Gupta, in line with his criticism towards the purity-pollution hierarchy, is also critical towards the terms 'lower caste' and 'upper caste'. He argues: "To call them 'low caste' or 'middle caste' can be very misleading and takes our attention away from the fact that they do not see themselves as inferior in any essential sense. Perhaps they are poorer, they may be less powerful, less literate, but not essentially made of substances that are inferior, let alone polluting" (Gupta 2004, xiii). In my view, the term low caste is not necessarily a statement in the way Gupta sees it. In this study the term is used as a concept that intends to do justice to reality as it is perceived by the people studied.

[229] A Bengali term *antyaja* is commonly translated as 'lowborn', 'low caste', 'depressed class' or one of the Śūdra or Caṇḍāla community (Biswas 2000).

[230] Most of my Janbazar and Harijan Basti interviewees had a strong *jāti* affiliation, which was expressed by communal symbols such as a communal temple and deity or saint of the community.

Untouchables: despised but necessary for the whole

As already stated, the practice of untouchability has been interpreted as an apparent consequence of purity ideals and their execution.[231] Pollution contagion and degeneration of one's race are thought to threaten every member of Hindu society if the rules concerning marriage, food, and social interaction are violated. Untouchability is generally considered as either a permanent or temporary condition.[232] My interviewees did not refer to themselves as untouchables. When women used the term untouchable (*acchuta*), they indicated a temporary condition of impurity or temporary restrictions, never a permanent state. Similar to upper caste people, they thought that the impurity could be controlled by adhering to a set of restrictions. Women agreed to certain ranking between people, but the hierarchies did not seem to be that fixed.[233] There was a tendency to make comparisons and consider only the ranking of those communities that were close to one's own status.

Low castes are seen as standing in an ambiguous position in Indian society; they in fact are not outside the community of four castes but on its margins. The low castes are required to perform tasks deemed necessary for the rituals and political constitution of the community. They are both neglected and necessary. Similarly, according to Mikael Aktor, the images of untouchables are ambiguous; they are seen as both protector and threat.[234] They can serve others by means of their capacity to handle impurity and by keeping dirt away. For example, they can handle birth waste, kill harmful animals, hunt, work on the cremation ground, and execute criminals. At the same time, they are thought to be dangerous because they have the potential to contaminate others.[235]

According to Moffat's classical yet debated view, untouchables do not possess a separate subculture; their modes of action and thought are exactly the same as those of the rest of the Indian population: Far from questioning the dominant social order, the untouchables replicate a microcosm analogous to the global system, and construct among themselves a complete set of institutions and status relationships from which they have been excluded by the high castes

[231] Irrespective of the purity ideals, it has been a common practise of high caste masters to sexually exploit untouchable women. For some reason, untouchable women have not been too degraded or polluted for sexual relations (Mendelsohn & Vicziany 2000, 11).

[232] In most Hindu communities women are thought to become untouchables during menstruation and after childbirth, and the family is considered to be in a polluted state after the death of a close relative. A person may also be condemned to untouchability if he or she has been contaminated by impure objects or as a consequence of violating a moral law (Aktor 2000, 137–138; Das 1997a, 74; Kolenda 1997, 80).

[233] This very conclusion has also been drawn by several scholars carrying on fieldwork in various Indian communities. Most agree on the existence of a certain caste hierarchy, but each caste seems to have their own version of it as well as their place in it (see, for example, Agrawal 2004; Charsley & Karanth 1998; Deliège 1999; Karanth 2004; Sahay 2004).

[234] Aktor 2000, 134.

[235] Aktor 2000, 141–142; Das 1997a, 74–75; Mendelsohn & Vicziany 2000, 10.

for reason of their inferiority.[236] Moffat's view has been questioned, for example, by Gupta and Karanth. Gupta does not see any sense in arguing "that lower castes willingly acquiesce in their own degradation", a view agreed also by Karanth, who for his part suggests that "replication may also be seen as a way of establishing an independent cultural identity as well as expressing dissent against the hegemony of the dominant social order" (Gupta 2004, x; Karanth 2004, 138).

[236] Moffat 1979, 3.

Moffat's view is in line with Dumont, who has argued that Brahmans and untouchables occupy complementary, almost inseparable positions in the Indian hierarchy.[237] This complementarity of Brahmans and untouchables is shown in the following outline introduced by Robert Deliège.[238] The dichotomy will be discussed and challenged below in the light of this study:

Table 1: The complementarity of Brahmans and untouchables

| | **Brahmans** | **Untouchables** |
|---|---|---|
| *Marriage* | unique and indissoluble | frequent divorce |
| | religious | civil |
| | no extramarital sex | sexual freedom |
| | dowry | bride-price |
| | no marriage of widows | remarriage of widows authorized |
| | child marriage | marriage later on |
| | | |
| *Diet* | strictly vegetarian | eating of all meat and beef |
| | no eggs | eating carrion |
| | | |
| *Religion* | vegetarian gods | carnivorous gods and demons |
| | Sanskrit tradition | popular religions, village cult |
| | worship | pragmatic religion based on the satisfaction of immediate needs |
| | regular and complicated rites | no regular prayer, no cult |
| | great insistence of purity | permanent impurity |
| | | |
| *Economy* | intellectual work | manual work |
| | tilling land prohibited | study prohibited |
| | | |
| *Exterior signs* | sacred thread | |
| | | |
| *Privileges* | gold jewellery | all these privileges prohibited |
| | parasol, shoes, traditional clothes | |

[237] Dumont 1980, 46–47; Moffat 1979, 3.

[238] Deliège 1997, 117–118.

Deliège's summary, though informative, is stereotypical, and fails to pay attention to the great heterogeneity of both groups. It does not take into account recent changes and developments. Based on my fieldwork of three low caste communities, I disagree with his views in many respects. For example, as regards marriage, the practices of the three low caste communities studied resemble Brahman marriage in all aspects. Among the women interviewed there was only one divorcee who actually had officially not divorced but had been deserted by her husband; this, however, was a rare occasion. None of the widowed interviewees had remarried. Most families followed the custom of paying a dowry to the bridegroom's family and celebrated elaborate marriage rituals conducted by a local Brahman. Most Bengali Brahmans do not follow diet orders as strictly as orthodox Brahmans usually do. It is commonly known that they have a great appetite for fish, whereas many low caste people can not afford to eat anything but rice and lentils. Even those interviewees who could afford eating meat and fish abstained from it on a regular basis because of their religious fasting. Most of the low caste respondents adhered to regular ritual conduct by carefully observing the ritual rules – as Brahmans in Deliège's construct do. The families worshipped various carnivorous goddesses in the same manner as the rest of the Bengali society including Brahmans. Based on my research, I argue that a dichotomy such as Deliège suggests did not exist in the low caste communities under this study.

## 4.6 Special characteristics of the interviewees' religious background

### Practitioners of popular Hinduism

As mentioned, I consider the communities studied as Hindus even though people identified themselves as Hindus only when they wanted to stand out as a distinct group compared to, for example, Christians or Muslims, which they considered foreign religions. The term Hindu was more or less comparable to their nationality. The usual concept they used when referring to religion or religious was *dharma*. Women could say that someone was a religious person (*dharmī lok* or *dhārmikī lok*), which meant more or less that she was a virtuous person who faithfully performed her ritual duties. In Hindu thinking the concept of *dharma,* depending on the context, is understood as 'the right', 'duty', 'path', or 'law', which the practitioner of *Sanātana Dharma* (Eternal Path/Law) must follow.[239]

In practice, Hindu *dharma* was not something women would relate to. Neither did they typically identify themselves as Vaiṣṇava, Śaiva, or Śākta. Only one of the interviewees stated clearly that she was a Vaiṣṇava, worshipper of Kṛṣṇa. Instead, their *dharma* was to abide by and participate in the ritual conduct peculiar to their community (*jatyācāras*), native region (*deśācāras*), family (*kulācāras*), and women themselves (*strī ācāras*).[240] In the city environment, the neighbourhood (*pāṛā*) was also an important religious unit, which celebrated certain

[239] Grimes 1996, 112–113; Parpola 2005, 119. The societal implications of *dharma* are recorded in the law books of Dharmaśāstras.

[240] Instead of the term *ācāra,* the practices, duties and customs can be referred to as *-prathā* or *-kārma* (Biswas 2000).

ritual feasts together. Women referred to the neighbourhood religious celebrations as *bāriyāri pūjā,* which simply means 'a public function organized by the public'. The most important operative term as regards the interviewees' religious conduct was *pūjā:* Women said that they were celebrating, giving, and making *pūjā* for a particular deity during a particular occasion for the sake of a particular reward.

The ritual conduct, beliefs, and habits of my interviewees were all based on an oral tradition. The women had learned the details of religious conduct by imitating their elders. Many of them had started to make *pūjā* in the name of a certain deity or deities after being assured of divine encounters and granted wishes by other devotees of that deity. Some women mentioned that they had learned religious practices from the fellow devotees of a particular guru or saint. Most women knew excerpts from mythical stories of the great Indian epics *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*, and some ritual stories (*bratakathā*) which justified and explained the origin and fruit of ritual practices. Some Ganti women were able to narrate religious poems (Maṅgala-Kābya) and sing narrative songs (*pañcālī*), both important elements of Bengali folk religion. When the Janbazari women congregated, they would join in singing *bhajanas,* devotional songs revering Lord Śiva in particular. In listening to the women's narratives it occurred to me that they were prone to identify themselves with the principal characters of the mythical stories. It often happened that while narrating the religious story, they turned to narrating their own stories.[241]

In carrying out religious practices women were first and foremost fulfilling their religious duties and covering their immediate needs. The practices were adjusted to accommodate to their family's requirements. It was typical to invent and adopt new customs and deities, mould the old, and even cross the borders of other religions. This flexibility followed from the oral character of their religious practices.[242]

### Vaiṣṇava, Śaiva, and Śākta influences

The religious beliefs and conduct of my interviewees were influenced not only by communal, regional, and family impact, but also by the main branches of the Hindu traditions: Vaiṣṇava, Śaiva, and Śākta. Most of the interviewees revered Kṛṣṇa, one of the main incarnations (*abatāra*) of Viṣṇu, as one of the deities among other deities.[243] Kṛṣṇa was recognized as the

[241] Several anthropological and folkloristic works show that expressive oral traditions provide women with a channel to articulate their feelings and experiences of everyday life (see, for example, Gold 2003; Lamb 2003; Narayan 2003; Raheja & Gold 1994; Trawick 1986; 1988; 1991). According to Raheja, women's narrative oral tradition criticizes gender bias and kinship practices, and creates and recreates the social practices and cultural forms of the everyday world of singers and speakers (Raheja 2003b, 5–6).

[242] As regards the definition and character of the popular religion, see Banerjee 2002, 2–6. Oral nature does not, however, necessarily indicate that the religious practice is fluid and free. For example, it is often of utmost importance that orally transmitted *mantrās,* credo, or liturgy are repeated in a fixed manner.

[243] The majority of Hindus throughout India venerate God Viṣṇu in his many forms, celebrate feasts (Dīpāvali, Holi, Kṛṣṇa Janmāṣṭami) for the reverence of Vaiṣṇava deities, worship Śrī Lakṣmī, the consort of Viṣṇu, and

epithets of Nārāyaṇa, Bāsudēba, Kṛṣṇa-Gopāla, or as the union of Kṛṣṇa and his consort, Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa or Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa. If women wanted to give a Vaiṣṇava deity a supreme position, he was referred to as Hari, a name that stands for at least Viṣṇu, Kṛṣṇa, and Nārāyaṇa. One of the interviewees, who exclusively revered Kṛṣṇa, wore visible signs of Vaiṣṇavas and said that she aimed at behaving according to the principles of the ideal Vaiṣṇava devotee.[244] A few interviewees had taken an initiation (*dīkṣā*) under a Vaiṣṇava guru or saint, and repeated the sacred syllables (*mantrā*) given by the guru or representative of the guru. The most popular Vaiṣṇava gurus among my interviewees were Bābā Brahmachārī and Anukūl Ṭhākur, both of whom had already died. A few women had taken an initiation for living gurus Sai Josai and Gurumā.[245] Some women were accustomed to joining the groups of people in nearby temples singing devotional songs (*kīrtana*) composed by Vaiṣṇava poets and devotees.

Another branch of Hindus, Śaiva, revere Lord Śiva as a primary deity. Most interviewees had a poster or photograph of one of the forms of Śiva and a phallic symbol of Śiva (*Śivaliṅga*) placed at their home altar. They worshipped the deity as part of their daily domestic *pūjās* as well as in temples and shrines having Śaiva symbols. None of the women, however, was Śaiva in a sense that they worshipped exclusively Śiva. Women portrayed Śiva as having a variety of names and epithets. The most common way to refer to Śiva was to call the deity Bābā (Father), Mahēśvara (the God of gods), and Mahādeba (the Great God).[246] The most common epithets of Śiva were Bābā Tāraknāth, Śaṅkara Bābā, Bholā Bābā (also called Bābā

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belong to one of the various sects, movements, or traditions of Vaiṣṇavism. Some particularly devotional Vaiṣṇava movements are monotheistic in nature (Olson 2007, 145–186).

[244] Vaiṣṇavas may be recognized by the mark on their foreheads (*tilaka*). They apply the paste – usually a mixture of clay and sandalwood – in two vertical lines, which usually connect at the bottom, forming a letter U. My Vaiṣṇava interviewee did not always draw the *tilaka*, which was due to her widowhood. However, on her neck she always wore a necklace of beads (*kaṇṭhi*), which she utilised in repeating the *mantrās* (*japa karā*) in the name of her favourite deity. While she was repeating the *mantrā*, she kept the *kaṇṭhi* in a cotton bag tied to her wrist. At her home she had a separate corner for a statue of baby Kṛṣṇa (Gopāla), where she had a bed, furniture, and objects needed for the caring and entertainment of the deity. She looked after the Gopāla as it was her dear child. She gave baths to, fed, and entertained the image regularly. She also kept a holy basil (*tulasī*) plant in her small yard and considered it a deity. She maintained a pure vegetarian diet and survived by begging for alms in the name of Kṛṣṇa. These customs are typical of Bengali devotional Vaiṣṇava.

[245] Bābā Brahmachārī, also known as Ṭhākur Śrī Śrī Bālak Brahmachārī (1920–1993), is believed to be an incarnation of Śrī Chaitanya. He was born in Dacca, Bangladesh, and is claimed to have more than sixty million disciples and devotees (Life and Messages of Thakur Sri Sri Balak Brahmachari).

Anukūl Ṭhākur, also known by the name Ṭhākur Anukūlchandra (1888–1969), was also born in Bangladesh. He set up ashrams for the fostering of spiritual development. His main teachings are: 1) God is one and all the prophets the same (Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, Jesus Christ, Mohammed, Chaitanya, etc.); 2) humans need a living guru that has attributes of God; and 3) people should marry according to the principles of *varṇa*. The guru Anukūl Ṭhākur is claimed to have two hundred million disciples (Hauserman 1995; Sri Sri Thakur Anukulchandra Satsang).

Sai Josai and Gurumā are present day Vaiṣṇava gurus. My interviewees told that the gurus have a residence (*āśrama*) in the Ghurni neighbourhood in Krishnanagar, Nadia District. The gurus celebrate two festivals a year, which bring disciples together for the celebration of *pūjā* feast and to receive blessings from the gurus.

[246] The translations of the gods' names are by Biswas 2000. While *Bābā* (Father) may be used exclusively of Śiva, it is also combined with the names of other male gods. Both past and living gurus and male religious specialists are also referred to as *Bābā*.

Bholānāth), and Bābā Lokenāth.[247] Most interviewees participated in the celebrations of Śiva, the most popular among them being Śivarātri. The Bengali feast Nīl Ṣaṣṭhī was popular among the women of Ganti and Harijan Basti, whereas several Janbazari women observed Śaṅkara brata. A few mentioned folk festival of Gājan, but the originally rural feast was not celebrated in any of the three communities.[248]

The relationship of Śaiva and the third branch of Hinduism, Śākta, is known to be unique in many ways. Even though they are considered as separate branches, the worship of Lord Śiva and the Śākta goddesses merge in various respects. Many of the Śākta goddesses are associated with Śiva as his spouses whereas a number of Śaivas believe that Śiva may be reached by worshipping divine female energy (*śakti*). In Śākta theology the emphasis is given to the feminine manifestation through which the male non-manifested Śiva is realized. Thus, Śiva is ultimately thought to be dependent upon *śakti* and subordinate to the goddesses.[249] Among the women studied, this curious relationship was observed at the celebration of Nīl Ṣaṣṭhī.

Although none of the women interviewed was exclusively Śākta, all of them worshipped female divinities.[250] The goddess introduced by Śākta theology is a contradictory and ambiva-

[247] Bābā Tāraknāth is a form of Śiva known especially because of the famous pilgrimage site in Tarakeswar, West Bengal (Morinis 1982). Śaṅkara Bābā reflects the beneficial side of the Lord Śiva. Śaṅkara means someone who is auspicious and conferring happiness. The most famous Śaṅkara is the great sage and famous Indian philosopher who expounded the philosophy of absolute non-dualism (Advaita Vedānta). The epithet Bholā Bābā (and Bābā Bholānāth) also refers to the beneficial side of Śiva. Bholā is someone who is innocent, forgetful, and simple. The famous Bholā Bābā or Bābā Bholānāth was a poet saint who established his hermitage on the banks of the Yamunā River, composed *bhajans* and poetical works on Vedantā (Grimes 1996, 91, 282. Bābā Lokenāth will be introduced in the next chapter).

[248] On Gājan, see, for example, Ferrari 2010a; Nicholas 2008.

[249] Kinsley 2003, 36; Sherma 2002, 34. In goddess theology the concept of *śakti* is mythologized and identified with the goddess Śakti, a powerful, active, dynamic being that creates, governs, and protects the universe. Thus, the devotees of the goddess (and a variety of manifestations of the goddess) are generally called Śāktas, the followers of Śakti. While Śāktas accord the goddess with the highest position, the divine feminine is revered in other Hindu traditions as well. For example, most Śaivas and Vaiṣṇavas consider the goddess a consort or energy (*śakti*) of the principle male deities (Charpentier 2010, 231; Flood 1996, 175; Gupta 1991, 206, 209; Kinsley 1986, 133–134; Nicholas 1982, 192).

[250] Even the Ganti interviewee who claimed to be a Vaiṣṇava worshipped a goddess since she identified herself with Rādhā, the lover and ideal devotee (*bhakta*) of Kṛṣṇa. However, Rādhā is not considered a traditional Śākta goddess even if she is given a superior position in some movements such as the Rādhāvallabha tradition (on Rādhā see, for example, Hawley & Wulff 1982; Olson 2007, 177–178; Wulff 1998).

The earliest written evidence of goddess worship is from the Vedic texts, mainly *Ṛgveda*. However, goddess worship in Indian territory is claimed to be influenced by the religious practices of the Middle East, which were reflected in the culture of the Indus valley (2600–1900 BCE.) (Parpola 1992, 49; 2005, 79). Goddess worship emerged from obscurity to a position of real importance around the fifth and sixth century AD. Several goddesses appeared in iconographic and literary sources and acquired positions of great importance. In earlier theology, goddesses were shadowy wife figures of male gods but now they began to be worshipped as separate entities in their own temples. Texts started to record a growing tradition of devotion to a single Great Goddess, (*Devī* or *Mahādevī* in Sanskrit). The tendency to consider all goddesses as related beings and to subsume them all under one great female being began to dominate certain texts: Goddess theology is most clearly manifested in *Devīmāhātmya* (literally, *Glorification of the Goddess*) and *Devī-Bhāgavatapurāṇa*. Affirmation of unity underlying all goddesses is usually expressed in one of the following ways: First, one particular goddess such as Lakṣmī or Durgā ascends to the position of the highest deity, and all the other goddesses are understood as portions or manifestations of her. Second, it is assumed that there is one transcendent Great Goddess who possesses

lent figure, and reflects the same duality as the feminine in Hindu thinking in general.[251] The Great Goddess has both benign and terrible forms.[252] On the one hand, she is the Mother (in Bengali Mā, Mātā, or Mātāji), a title that my interviewees frequently used in addressing the goddesses. Goddess as Mother is thought to be the benevolent source of life which is overflowing with abundant good. On the other hand, she is equally called Mother in her fierce forms (Mā Kālī, Mā Durgā, Śītalā Mā, etc.). Thus, the divine mother is also a potentially terrible, malevolent force, who demands the offering of blood in order to placate her wrath. In her auspicious forms, the goddess displays positive roles; she is the source of fertility and the protector of dharmic order. She embodies cultural creativity, wifely duty, nourishment, and all material wealth. She is regarded as a granter of wisdom, learning, and liberation, and as an embodiment of female beauty and the exciter of desire. In her fierce and terrible forms the goddess is associated with war, blood, destruction, death, and hunger, and usually has a protective role.[253]

Some scholars have pondered the question of to what extent the female power (*śakti*), goddess worship, and Śākta theology translate into opportunities for empowerment of women in India.[254] Western feminists in particular have been optimistic about the emancipating capacity of goddess symbolism in present-day India and elsewhere. However, it is notable that the feminine principle of *śakti* has occupied a seat in traditional Hindu thought since the middle

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most of the classical characteristics of the ultimate reality (*brahman*), and all goddesses are partial manifestations of her. It is difficult to separate these two approaches. In practice, the innumerable goddesses of local traditions are generally regarded as manifestations or aspects of a single Great Goddess. However, the Great Goddess is usually called Durgā, Lakṣmī, or Pārvatī, all of whom have their distinctive mythologies and appearance as well (Basham 1997, 311; Coburn 1996, 31; Flood 1996, 174; Hawley 1996, 6; Humes 1997, 39; Kinsley 1986, 2, 132; Pintchman 1994).

[251] According to Wadley, the duality that is built into the concept of feminine in Hindu thinking concerns both goddesses and humans, which are at the same time thought to be fertile and aggressive, benevolent and malevolent. Goddesses and women have the potential to be bestowers and destroyers. A popular saying from *Devīmāhātmya* characterizes the duality as follows: "In times of prosperity she indeed is Lakṣmī, who bestows prosperity in the homes of men; and in times of misfortune, she herself becomes the goddess of misfortune and brings about ruin" (*Devīmāhātmya* 12.40; Wadley 1977, 113–114; 1988, 24; 1991, 157; Wadley 1995c, 112).

[252] Usually the ambivalence is thought to lie in the representation of the goddess as either alone or as the spouse of a male god. When she is depicted alone, she is considered as potentially destructive whereas when she is represented as a spouse of a male god, she is thought to be the nurturing mother and the embodiment of the god's benign grace. A similar ambivalence pertains to woman: When independent, a woman is believed to be potentially harmful, but when under the control of a male, she is considered as benevolent (Gupta Gombrich 1990, 50; Kondos 1986, 173–197; Mitter 1991, 74–75; O'Flaherty 1980, 90–91; Sugirtharajah 1994, 70–75; Hawley 1998, 9). However, this view is questioned by a few scholars such as Kurtz.

[253] Kinsley 1986, 139–145. According to Kinsley, the goddess's two facets are interrelated. In her auspicious forms, she is unceasingly fruitful, full of awesome energy that pervades and nourishes all creatures. But to be able to nourish, she herself must also be nourished. She must eat, for her energy is not infinite. Her awesome creative power must be matched by her awesome hunger (Kinsley 1986, 149).

[254] Charpentier 2010, 253–258; Erndl 1997, 17; Kurtz 2002, 183; Pintchman 2002, 196–198; Sherma 2000, 24–25; Wadley 1995c, 127–130; Young 1999. Madhu Kishwar, a founder editor of *Manushi – a Journal about Women and Society* puzzles over the question of how Indian people can reconcile themselves with the fact that in a culture which worships the goddess Sarasvatī, so many women are illiterate; that people revere Lakṣmī, the source of wealth, but so many women are poor and economically dependent on their husbands; that men praise feminine *śakti* but women in many communities are still not allowed to leave their homes without male protection (Kishwar 2003, 25).

of the first millennium AD without any marked positive influence on women's social status; quite the contrary, the patriarchal agenda has dominated Indian society since post-Vedic times. A number of studies both attest and contest to the positive impact of *śakti* and goddess worship on women's religious lives.[255] According to Humes, the Great Goddess acts as an empowering role model for some Hindu women today, but these women are usually educated in modern secular schools and hold privileged positions of power in the culture and economy.[256] In her other study on Goddess Vindhyavāsinī, Humes concludes that the worshippers of the Goddess portray ordinary women and the Goddess as not having much in common. None of her interviewees linked women and the Goddess together through the concept of *śakti* and most of them maintained demeaning views on women.[257]

In recent studies on goddess worship and women, scholars have suggested that there are two distinct levels of interpreting female symbolism within Hindu India. Gross, Pintchman, and Charpentier all perceive that goddess worship does not seem to translate into empowerment of women in Indian society, and that it is not even meant to do so. Instead, goddess worship is for empowering women's personal lives. The function of the goddesses is to provide psychological support; to give spiritual power; to inspire self-confidence; to give contentment in the goddesses' presence, and so on.[258]

Based on this research I argue that most women did not worship female deities on the basis of gender but primarily because of other qualities. However, the gender of the deity was not without meaning. Certain goddesses such as Santoṣī Mā, Lakṣmī, and Mā Ṣaṣṭhī were praised for their favourable feminine character, wisdom, and power. These goddesses represented potential mythical role models and ideals for women, and introduced positive ideas about womanhood. Charpentier in her study on female gurus concludes that, for both male and female followers "goddess symbolism has a significant impact on their own well-being, providing positive female imagery and powerful role models" (Charpentier 2010, 256). Several of my interviewees had a female divinity as their personal deity (*iṣṭadebatā*) and family deity (*kuladebatā*). Some women portrayed the goddess as their close friend with whom they shared their concerns and hopes, and with whom they had emotionally close and meaningful relationships. The female divinity provided women with a transcendent ideal to look up to, or even an immanent presence in whose divinity women could participate, for example, through possession experiences.

Women's thoughts of the goddess as mother attested to the dualistic nature of feminine. On the one hand, the divine mother was portrayed as an ideal earthly mother. The terms referring to motherly affection and the devotee's affection towards the nurturing mother were equally

[255] Hallstrom suggests that the Śākta-influenced Bengali milieu played an important part in the success of the woman saint Anandamayi Ma (Hallstrom 1999). Gupta Gombrich attests that Śākta women saints are granted more religious freedom and higher status than Vaiṣṇava saints (Gupta Gombrich 1991, 208–209).

[256] Humes 1997, 52–53.

[257] Humes 2002, 123–124.

[258] Charpentier 2010, 256; Gross 2002, 106–107; Pintchman 1994, 195–197; 2002, 197.

used of both divine and earthly mothers. On the other hand, many of the mother goddesses (Śītalā Mā, Kālī Mā, Mā Tārā) were feared and held in awe for their ferocious, bloodthirsty, and unstable character. The malicious nature was considered as the condition of their power, and thus justified. Women were not troubled by these outwardly controversial ideas about the divine mother.

# 5 Types of mothering rituals

## 5.1 Ritual practices performed in hope of offspring

### 5.1.1 Aiming at becoming pregnant

In the Hindu tradition becoming a mother is a fundamental duty of a married woman (*strīdharma*). No woman out of those who participated in this study questioned the duty; they took it for granted. No one had deliberately delayed the birth of children for a personal or any other reason. In this chapter I will describe and analyse ritual conduct and religious practices that my interviewees adhered to when they were hoping to become pregnant and to have a child. I will also introduce religious practices by those women who had difficulties in becoming pregnant. There are practices common to all three communities, ritual activities typical of one community, and activities performed by individuals only.

According to my interviewees, daughters of a family are not usually given much instruction about performing women's rituals (*meyeder ācāras*) before marriage. The following comments of Ru and Praba represent what was told by most women:

> Before my marriage I did not do *pūjās*. Only when it was Śibarātri, they encouraged me to do it. But now that I am married, I am doing the *pūjās*.[259]

> When I was yet unmarried, I did not know a thing about gods or goddesses.[260]

Most women told that when they were unmarried they observed their elders conducting domestic and community rituals but they themselves only occasionally participated in the performance of *pūjās* and religious feasts. During their girlhood, most interviewees had not been well acquainted with the rules of ritual conduct (*niyama*) and did not necessarily find them meaningful for themselves, but were familiar with the celebrations of religious feasts, ritual customs, and images portraying various divinities. Some of my informants mentioned that they had adhered to fasts in their natal family. In most cases, the role of a paternal family was to direct the devotion of their unwed daughters in order to find a good husband and serve his family. Daughters were not thought to require detailed knowledge about the ritual conduct of their parents' line, since after their marriage they were supposed to adopt the customs of their husband's line.

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[259] Ru was interviewed on 2 December 2003 at her home in Harijan Basti. Literally the meaning of Śibarātri (in Bengali) is 'a night of Śiva'. Ru actually refers to Mahā Śivarātri, which is celebrated in Hindu community by all castes either in the month of Māgha (from the middle of January to the middle of February) or Phālguna (from the middle of February to the middle of March). During the feast elaborate rituals are staged at the temples of Śiva. People observe fasting, bring offerings and pour water on *liṅga* (phallus representing Śiva) (Channa 1984, 136; Singh & Nath 2002, 106–109; Werner 1997, 151–152). In all three communities participating in my study, women and even some young men celebrated Mahā Śivarātri.

[260] Praba was interviewed on 11February and on 5 March 2004 at her home in Janbazar.

The duty and expectation that the marrying couple is to continue the family line is clearly staged in the marriage rituals (in Sanskrit *vivāha saṃskāras*). Various details in the rituals of a Hindu marriage refer to the hope of offspring and are meant to promote the fertility of the couple.[261] The gifts offered to deities during the marriage rituals are mainly given in order to bestow the new couple with wealth in the form of offspring and material goods. The bride as a potential mother is highly regarded. In Bengal marriages, according to Fruzzetti, "a new wife (*strī*) is introduced to her husband's house as a deity, wife, and future mother" and is "called Lakṣmī *bou* – a model of Lakṣmī, the embodiment of [the] goddess's qualities" (Fruzzetti 1990, 123).[262]

The interviews show that most women had felt obliged to prove their fecundity right after being married. Consequently, for most women, the first child was born within a year after the marriage. If the coming of the first child was delayed, it caused anxiety within the family. In joint families hosting three to four generations under the same roof, having a child was not understood as private business left to the couple to decide. Women said that some family members did not hesitate to express their opinions and expectations concerning their prospective heir. A Ganti interviewee Pura told me that she had given birth to her first child only five years after her marriage.[263] She married at the age of fourteen and since then had been hoping for a child. As Pura did not immediately conceive, her relatives grew angry and started scolding her until she finally became pregnant. The involvement of the family members was not, however, considered as having a mere negative value. According to some interviewees, family members also gave support, encouraged, and consoled the new daughter-in-law while she waited to become pregnant.

According to my informants, the responsibility for providing the kin with an offspring is largely the woman's, almost to the extent that she alone is responsible. Despite a general knowledge of human biology, the focus is on a woman's capacity to reproduce, and the failure to do so is likewise hers. Most of the practices – religious or medical – that were thought to improve fertility were either done by women or directed to women only. The inequality and imbalance involved was not questioned by any of my informants. One optional justification of this is the common Hindu metaphor of conception, according to which woman is thought to represent the field (womb) that bears the seed, representative of man.[264] Woman as a field may be thought of as either fertile or barren soil; at any rate, she is thought to be inferior to the seed, since, as Manu claims, "the offspring of all creatures is marked by the characteristics of the seed" (*The Law Code of Manu* 9.35).

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[261] Pandey 1994, 229–233. On Bengali marriage rituals, see Fruzzetti 1990, 54, 70.

[262] *Bou* means wife.

[263] Pura gave her interview at her home on 2 February 2004.

[264] *The Law Code of Manu* (*Manusmṛti*) 9.33. This primeval idea of woman as field and man as seed is also acted out in Hindu cosmology. Wadley points out that field and seed (female/male) represent the essential duality that is thought to underlie all creation in Hindu thinking: *Prakṛti* (nature) is the active female counterpart of the cosmic person *puruṣa*, who is the inactive male aspect. *Prakṛti* represents the undifferentiated matter of nature (field) and *puruṣa* provides the spirit (seed), the structured code. The union of spirit and matter, seed and earth, code and non-code, inactive and active, is thought to be a prerequisite of the creation of the world with all of its differentiated life forms (Wadley 1977, 114–115; 1988, 26; 1991, 158; 1995c, 113–114).

After the marriage, the young wife is taught to perform the rites of the husband's line (*baṃśa*). The older women of the house, especially the mother-in-law, give instruction on the customs and code of ritual conduct (*niyama*) of the marital family. The daughter-in-law's devotion is directed to promoting the well-being of her husband and the continuance of his line. Many of my interviewees considered this phase of life as tense: A teenage girl has to leave her childhood family and relatives and move to a new environment amongst a new family. The glamour surrounding the new bride during the marriage ceremony fades away at short notice. Before bearing a child, she is assigned the lowest position in the hierarchy of the women. The desire to fulfil her primary marital duty is often so intense that a young wife applies various means to achieve her goal. To promote fertility, a selection of religious practices, local customs, and both traditional and modern medicine are available. To assure conception, a young wife is likely to carry out vows of abstinence (fasting and other restrictions), offer gifts for the deities, who they believe, have the capacity to influence events, or try a fertility treatment of some sort.

Newly married wives in the low caste communities of Ganti, Harijan Basti, and Janbazar seldom engaged in duties outside the home before the birth of their first-born. Some families involved in agricultural labour, however, sent their new daughter-in-law to the fields to earn for the family. Most women waited until they became pregnant and then engaged in childcare. Usually they also took responsibility for domestic chores along with the other women of the house. If the mother-in-law was working outside the home the young wife was also given the responsibility of carrying out domestic rituals, religious vows (*bratas*) and *pūjās* for the family's deities. The tendency to shift the responsibility of running the religious duties was also confirmed by a few of my older interviewees, who reported that due to the hardship involved they had given up performing domestic rituals and fasts (*uposa*), and transferred the duty to younger women of the family to fulfil. Despite these domestic chores and religious duties, however, the first and foremost function of a young wife in her marital family was to produce an offpring, preferably a son.

## Vows, promises, and fasts: remarks on terminology

### *Brata* – a vow for fulfilment of desire

Besides the duty to regularly run domestic *pūjās* for the family's favourite deities, the central domain of women's rituals in the Hindu tradition are voluntary (*kāmya*) rituals, the most common of which are vows called *bratas* (in Sanskrit *vrata*).[265] *Bratas,* which are performed in a

[265] McDaniel distinguishes between the folk *bratas* and more formal type of *bratas* (McDaniel 2003, 29). The practices of folk *bratas* originate from oral and village traditions in which the centre of attention are various local and village deities who are revered for their boons and blessings. The formal *bratas* have their origin in classical religious literature such as the Vedas, Dharmaśāstras (particularly Nibandhas) and Purāṇas. In practice, elements of folk and formal *bratas* have merged and most *bratas* are somewhere between the two types (McDaniel 2003, 29).

carefully designated time and manner (*niyama*), involve adherence to discipline and particular restraints, usually fasting, ritual bathing, and abstaining from contacts with others.[266] The *brata* ritual may also include drawing of sacred designs (*ālpanā*), reciting of a spell or rhyme (*chaṛā*) and a ritual story (*bratakathā*); however, most of my interviewees did not maintain all of these. The conduct and ritual rules related to each *brata* are mainly transmitted orally and therefore have a wide range of local variations.

According to Basak, *bratas* are a "continuation of ancient belief in magic" and there are still many *bratas* "that are similar to the ones observed by primitive societies for acquiring the powers of magic and fertility" (Basak 2006, 13, 18).[267] *Bratas* are usually performed for the sake of this-wordly goals such as for ensuring general prosperity for family. However, there are a number of *bratas* for more specific wishes and desires, which cover almost all facets of life. The women interviewed for my study remarked that they observed *bratas*, for example, for a good husband, the birth of a son, recovering from illness, and for keeping evil influences away.[268] One important group of *bratas* concerned human fertility.[269] In answering my question on how she would advice someone hoping for a child, Harijan Basti interviewee Reha said:[270]

> One has to do *brata*. I have told many ladies to do a *brata* if they wish to get a son. In the month of Āśbina there is one fast (*uposa*).[271] It is *pūjā* of Śītalā Mā.

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Basak maintains that *bratas* can be classified into the classical and popular, or according to the person who is expected to perform the rite – an unmarried or married woman, widow, or any woman. Classical *bratas,* in Basak's view, are those that require a Brahman and are accompanied with show and pomp, whereas the popular *bratas* are much simpler (Basak 2006, 47).

[266] Kane notes that in the textual tradition the usual senses of *brata* are 1) a religious observance or vow, or restriction as to food and behaviour when one has undertaken a religious vow, and 2) the special food prescribed for sustenance when a person is engaged in a religious rite or undertaking (Kane 1968-1977, Vol.5. part 1, 23). The observation of *bratas* is especially popular in Bengal and the neighbouring regions. According to Basak, "no other country has so many rites and rituals as Bengal has. Bengalis seem to love these occasions which are an expression of their life-force" (Basak 2006, 13). As already mentioned, many present-day *bratas,* and their rules and stories, are collected into booklets called *Meyedera Bratakathā* and *Meyedera Bratapārban.*

[267] Basak emphasizes the view that ancient scriptures did not value folk cultures where *brata* practices flourished. *Bratas* were performed but outside the Āryan culture. Basak illustrates the co-existence of these two traditions by writing, "when the Āryans performed their *yajñas* to Indra, these others prepared for battle and inside the houses the women observed the *brata* […] for remaining married and not become widows after the battle" (Basak 2006, 16). Basak maintains that non-Vedic *bratas* eventually gained the acceptance of the Brahman culture for the reason that their performance had persisted throughout centuries (Basak 2006, 15–16). Maity is equally suspicious of the view that the *bratas* originated from the *śāstras.* He argues that *śāstric bratas* "were created later on by the Brahmans who wanted to benefit out of those, either by participating in the priestly function or by taking an upperhand in society" (Maity 1988, 3).

[268] For the definition and practice of *bratas* see, for example, Basak 2006, 13–14; Hauser 2008, 229–230; McDaniel 2003, 29; McGee 1987; 1991, 71–73; Pearson 1996, 2–5; Ray 1961, 10–11; Tagore 1919.

[269] Maity lists Bengali *bratas* that are associated with human fertility and divides them into *bratas* associated with different deities and ritualistic *bratas,* which, according to Maity, are based on sympathetic magic (Maity 1989, 170–171).

[270] Reha gave her interview on 18 March 2004 in Harijan Basti.

[271] The month of Āśbina is from the middle of September to the middle of October.

Interviewed women named several *bratas* generally associated with fertility. These include Puṇiypukur brata, Sūrya brata, Itu brata, Jay-Maṅgalbār brata, Maṅgalcaṇḍī brata, and Ṣaṣṭhī bratas in general. The women's accounts of how to conduct these *bratas* varied depending on the customs prevalent in the particular family, community, and region. For example, there are a number of diverse goddess Maṅgalcaṇḍīs and her *bratas,* all of which originate from different local traditions.[272]

In the context of this study, *brata* is viewed in the light of the gift exchange involved. *Brata* is a devotee's gift given to a deity to achieve a goal, a reward. In exchange for the gift the deity is believed to fulfil the desires and wishes expressed through *brata.* The gift of *brata* is the mark of the devotee's fidelity towards the deity and it often takes the form of a vow, resolve, or promise (*mānasika*) made to a particular deity to undertake some course of action, such as giving alms, or visiting a holy site.

Based on her examination of the textual background of *bratas,* McGee questions the convention that *bratas* are truly optional (*kāmya*).[273] In the classical literature *bratas* are viewed in the context of women's duty (*strīdharma*), and performing them, in fact, is obligatory (*nitya*) for the fulfillment of that duty. McGee argues that *bratas* can be motivated either by desire or by duty. Optional desire-born *bratas* are often performed out of personal cravings, but obligatory and occasional *bratas* are generally considered to be observed without desire or without attachment to any kind of reward or outcome. Such *bratas* are observed for reasons of duty, discipline, or out of sheer devotion towards the deity. They are believed to build the morality of the observer or to promote spiritual merit, or they may be observed to avoid the sin of not performing them.[274] The conclusions of my research are partly in line with McGee. Performing *bratas* was not necessarily considered a voluntrary practice by the women interviewed. Several women mentioned

[272] Manna 1993, 108. Goddess Maṅgalcaṇḍīs are soft and benevolent forms of the popular mother goddess Caṇḍī, who – according to Manna – was originally a tribal folk deity of the agrarian society but has managed to occupy a seat of honour among the Śākta deities of Bengalis. The diversity of her worship is shown by the multiple contexts in which her name is used. For instance, Caṇḍī is one of the names given to the victorious goddess Durgā, and at times is equated with the proto-type of the Great Mother Goddess (Mahādevī). In the Bengal region innumerable village goddesses are named after Caṇḍī. The word Caṇḍī is added to the name of a village, hence, the name of the village equals the name of the village goddess. Similar to the general image of Śākta deities, the various Caṇḍīs are fierce, violent, generally malevolent deities often identified with diseases and malaise. Manna's ethnographic work shows that her devotees believe that the goddess Caṇḍī protects them in all adverse situations and watches over them in all aspects of life. The benevolent Maṅgalcaṇḍī epithets of the goddess Caṇḍī are especially associated with human fertility and children. Women observe Maṅgalcaṇḍī bratas when they wish to become pregnant and for the happiness and welfare of children. The goddess is thought to be able to grant even a barren woman a child (Basak 2006, 107; Manna 1993, 90–93, 108–111; Sarkar 1986, 79–81).

My Janbazari interviewee Sumi worshipped Maṅgalcaṇḍī and participated in the yearly celebration of the goddess, which, according to the custom of her community, took place on the four consecutive Tuesdays in the month of Jaiṣṭha (from the middle of May to the middle of June). Sumi was interviewed on 11 February 2004, at her home in Janbazar.

[273] McGee 1987; 1991, 71–88. Similar to McGee, P. V. Kane underlines the importance of the textual background of *bratas* and associates them with the cosmic order and duty, *dharma.* Medieval Purāṇas, in particular, highlight allowing all people to conduct *bratas* (Kane 1968–1977, Vol.5. part 1, 8, 27).

[274] McGee 1991, 72–75.

that a family member had encouraged them or ordered them to observe certain vows. Performing *bratas* was expected of a respectable, decent wife and mother. There were, of course, *bratas* that women either personally chose to carry out in order to attain something they desired or because they wanted to pay homage to a certain deity. The results of my study disagree with McGee, however, regarding the nature of obligatory and occasional *bratas.* Among my interviewees there was very little, if any devotion without the attachment to rewards.

*Bratas,* while observed to quarantee of general long-term well-being, are also performed for immediate results. In such cases, *brata* can become a cry, a form of prayer for help in an emergency situation. Based on my research material, I concur with McGee that when an immediate outcome is needed, the *brata* process is often reversed. Instead of performing a rite with a certain goal or desire in mind, the observant contracts to perform that rite when and if the desire or need is fulfilled. McGee calls these *bratas* contractual and conditional rites.[275] Contractual rites were a common practice among the women in all three communities studied. They were not performed, however, only in the case of immediate needs, but also for more general reasons.

### Conditional promise of *mānasika* and its relation to *brata* and *pūjā*

Interviewed women referred to contractual rites as making or giving a promise (*mānasika karā*). The giving of voluntary promises was understood as a way to communicate wishes and unresolved circumstances to deities.[276] The logic of these contractual rites was as follows: The devotee makes a vow or promise to a deity, for instance, to bathe in the River Ganges or to give *pūjā* in certain holy place (both thought to be auspicious acts), but fulfils the promise only after the wish is granted by the deity.[277] The devotee promises to give gifts on condition of receiving the reward. The exchange of gifts is thus reversed. Another interpretation of the interaction is that the deity is first asked to do a favour and the *mānasika* is a payment, reward, or return gift on behalf of the devotee.[278]

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[275] McGee 1991, 80–81.

[276] The analysis of the interviews and fieldwork material indicates that women use the terms *mānasika* and *mānata* as synonyms. For the sake of uniformity, I mainly use the term *mānasika.* The term the interviewee herself suggests is used in quotes however. The practice of giving *mānasika* is dealt with by Maity 1989, 51–52, 56, 59, 107, and 153; Niyogi 1987, 11–12. According to McDaniel, offering *mānasika* is a common practice of men in particular (McDaniel 2003, 59). Based on this research I disagree with her view. Among the communities of this study, giving *mānasika* was practised by both women and men, but more by women.

[277] The most common promise among the interviewed was a continuous loyalty to the god to whom the promise had been given.

[278] The terms *mānasika* and *mānata* can be translated as 'mental', 'promised in the mind', 'a vow', or 'a voluntary promise'. One either takes a vow or promises to give an offering to a deity (*mānasika karā*), or offers to a deity what has been promised (*mānasika deoyā*) (Dev 2002a, 596–597).

In casual talk women used three terms, *mānasika, brata,* and *pūjā*, quite imprecisely and interchangeably. However, these three terms also had distinct uses. In her interview, Babi from Janbazar provides an enlightening demonstration of the usage of the terms:[279]

> During my pregnancy I kept a *brata* of Śaṅkar Bābā. Those wishing to have a baby always give *mānata*. Which *pūjā* they want to do is up to them.

In this quote the meaning of the three terms is obvious and the quote could be translated as follows: "During my pregnancy I kept the vow of Śaṅkar Bābā. Those who wish to have a baby always give promises. Which god they want to give an offering to is up to them". However, if one looks at the overall usage of the three terms in the women's casual speech, one can argue that Babi could have interchanged the three terms within the quote without essentially changing the meaning of her quote. She could, for example, have said: "During my pregnancy I kept *mānata* of Śaṅkar Bābā. Those who wish to have a baby always give *pūjā.* Which *brata* they want to do is up to them".

In what follows I will explain the distinct uses of the three terms. When my informants used the term *pūjā*, they could refer to a variety of different levels of practices. *Pūjā* was used for domestic rituals, various religious family feasts and community celebrations. It referred to annual religious feasts of the wider Hindu society but also to varied obligatory and voluntary rituals of individual devotees. The term *pūjā* was used both as a general concept and when referring to a particular feast or rite. *Pūjā* was also a certain part of a ritual that involved other elements as well. What was common to the usage of the term *pūjā* was that it involved the act of giving a gift to a deity. The actual *pūjā* was thought to be the act of offering, but the religious feast or rite involving the giving of gifts to a deity was also called *pūjā* for the sake of simplicity. Since giving *brata* or *mānasika* practically always involved *pūjā*, the offering of gifts, the women were tempted to replace *brata* and *mānasika* with the general concept of *pūjā*.

Both *brata* and *mānasika* involve vows or promises, which are typically kept to please and to influence the deity. While *bratas* usually have specific rules of conduct (*niyama*) with detailed timing and order, making *mānasika* can be a simple personal resolve which one can follow without telling anyone. However, some women mentioned that they had made *mānasika* together with the whole family. Among the interviewees, the usage of the term *brata* was often reduced to mean mere fasting. *Brata* was used as the equivalent of *uposa* or *upabāsa,* both meaning abstinence from taking food.[280] Women often talked about *pūjā* involving a fast when they actually referred to the observing of a *brata.*

To confuse the terminology and interconnection of the three above-mentioned terms just a bit more, we must note that fulfilling what had been promised (giving of *mānasika*) in most cases

[279] Babi was interviewed at her home in Janbazar on 11 December 2003.

[280] Dev 2002a, 278.

involved a *pūjā* or *brata* for the deity to whom the promise had been made. The promise obviously comprised other details as well, but hardly excluded a *pūjā* and observance of a fast. A detailed analysis of the term *mānasika* revealed that making or giving promises did not denote the fulfilment of a promise alone but also the intention and 'mental' process of doing *mānasika.* Ganti interviewee Sada clarifies the logic as follows:[281]

> I have one thing in my mind and if that happens, I will give a *pūjā* for god Nārāyaṇa with grandeur.[282]

The above quote reveals Sada's intention and condition for fulfilling her promise, which translate into real acts if the wish is granted. According to the women interviewed for my study, *mānasika* was always directed to one particular deity. Two or more distinct *mānasikas* could be made at the same time, but each one was an individual case. No-one suggested a general *mānasika* to any deity; the *mānasika* was always intentionally directed to a certain deity whom the devotee believed to be the expert in dealing with her particular situation.

### Some implications of the practice of giving *mānasika*

For the women interviewed, the giving of *mānasika* usually meant a promise of fidelity, indicated by regular worship and offerings to the deity. Sometimes giving *mānasika* included 'visiting' or 'meeting' with the deity, or 'celebrating' the fulfilment of one's desire with the deity. *Mānasika* had to be completed if the wish was granted. The most common ways were to set out for a pilgrimage to a temple or sacred place, and to give offerings to the visual form of the deity (*ṭhākura mūrti*). Some women contended that in completing *mānasika* the effigy or idol was required.[283] A Ganti interviewee Sada commented:

> When I got my son, I brought the god Kārtikeya to my home and made a *pūjā* for him.[284]

This was something that Sada had committed herself to doing if she gave birth to a son. When her wish was granted, she put the *mānasika* into practice. For those who found it difficult to become pregnant, the most typical advice of the interviewees was to give *mānasika*. Women in all three communities recommended voluntary promises as a means to having a hoped-for child.

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[281] Sada gave her interview on 1March 2004.

[282] Nārāyaṇa is one name for the god Viṣṇu, especially the manifestation in which the deity floats on the cosmic waters. Some of my interviewees claimed that women who wished to give birth to a son promised Nārāyaṇa a *pūjā* if they were granted their wish.

[283] Fieldwork diary, 12 January 2008.

[284] She refers here to the statue of the god Kārtikeya, which she had ordered an artisan of *ṭhākura* to fabricate for her.

Most of the women agreed with the way Unni from Janbazar and Bu from Ganti expressed it:[285]

> Those desiring a child keep *mānasika*. It may be any observance according to their liking. They promise to fulfil their vow after gaining motherhood. After becoming mothers, they perform the *pūjās* as they promised. I also kept a vow with my father-in-law. After my two sons were born, we went to the Kalighat temple. Kālī is the goddess of fertility and we offered Her a goat. (Unni)

> If it is difficult for a couple to have a child, they should give *mānata.* After I got my daughter and son, I fulfilled my *mānata.* That's why we have success. (Bu)

Even though the women in all three neighbourhoods under this study were more active in doing *mānasika,* it was not exclusively their domain. The promises that involved animal sacrifice (*bali*) or expensive gifts were usually given by family members together. At times, fulfilling of *mānasika* required significant effort from those who had made the vows. Rani from Ganti knew that some people were likely to offer gifts even exceeding their capacity:[286]

> In Sundarbon some people who did not get a child promised to give a gift (*dāna*) of a golden doll at the feet of a god. They gave *mānata* to god: If they were given a child, they would give gold, money, and *pūjā*. If they got a son, they would also give sweets.

Praba from Janbazar said that she had made a vow requiring much effort because her husband faced a difficult situation:[287]

> My husband was hospitalised for six months for broken bones in his leg. I promised to pay eight hundred rupees and to go out to the river bank (*ghāṭa*) and give offerings with the accompaniment of a band. So we went every year for four years by car accompanied by a band. These days we go without a band.[288]

When the women described the completing of *mānasika,* no one referred to it as thanksgiving or as a symbol of gratitude toward god. Instead, it was conceived as an important responsibility one was obliged to fulfil in order to avoid forthcoming misfortunes. They did not complain

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[285] Unni gave her interview at her home in Janbazar on 6 January 2004, and Bu on 1 March 2004 in Ganti.

[286] Rani gave her interview on 2 February 2004 in Ganti.

[287] Praba gave her interviews on 11 February and on 5 March 2004.

[288] The band Praba here refers to was a group of musicians invited to accompany the performance of a ritual. She seemed to think that if the ritual was accompanied by a band, it added to the effect and importance of the ritual. The loud music indicated that something was happening. At the same time, it was thought to invoke the presence of the deity. Playing was also meant to please the divinity. The volume, rhythm, and intensity of the playing indicated the key moments of the ritual. The louder and more passionate the playing was, the more significant the moment. Olson, in discussing the sensual nature of Hinduism, has come into similar conclusions about the connection of music and the divine (Olson 2007, 139–140). There is no denying that the band was also invited to impress others.

about the hardships involved in completing *mānasika.* Rather, it was a question of personal and family pride to be able to bear the hardships.

Women seemed to expect that completing *mānasika* required at least some suffering – either physical or material. On the one hand, suffering was seen as justified payment or compensation for the help given by the god, and on the other hand, suffering was thought to have the capacity to generate inner powers. Favourable suffering included complications during fasting, the hardships of long journeys, and debts caused by costly gifts. Suffering was perceived as a way of appealing to the deities, of exciting their attention and sympathy. It was a way to express one's seriousness and devotion. Niyogi, in studying the worship of village goddesses in South Bengal, emphasizes the importance of the deity actually seeing the anguish of the devotee. He maintains that devotees "have an idea that if they could practice physical torture before the deity then the revered god or goddess would feel satisfied with them and ultimately their expected desire would be fulfilled. […] The physical torture appears to be the ultimate form of deliverance. […] Finding no other alternative the devotee takes a mental vow to undergo the severe physical torture before the very eyes of the deity" (Niyogi 1987, 38).[289]

During the fieldwork, I occasionally paid a visit to those temples mentioned by the interviewees, and observed the activities. Once I came across a procession of people following a young lady who moved forward by prostrating herself on the ground. She got up and fell prostrate again, circling the temple in this manner several times. It was told by people participating in the procession that the woman was fulfilling her *mānasika.* She had previously come to pray for something and made the promise to circle the temple in this way if her wish was granted. Her family members were there to witness her fulfilment of the promise.[290] The practice of lying down before the image of the deity is generally known as *hatyā deoyā.* The term is also translated as 'to squat at the temple of a deity for obtaining divine favour'.[291] According to Niyogi, "the extreme form of *hatyā deoyā* is *daṇḍī khāṭā* which means tortuous crawling of devotee up to the altar from [the] distance of a selective spot" (Niyogi 1987, 38).[292]

The subject matter that my interviewees were not willing to discuss was what happens if people forget or neglect to complete their promise. When confronted with the topic, their common response was that people just would not do so. They would fear misfortune as a conse-

[289] McDaniel points that "*mānata* is found at many levels of ritual environment, for it is believed to be an especially effective way of gaining [a] deity's attention" (McDaniel 2004, 34).

[290] Fieldwork diary, 20 January 2008. People also perform such an activity as penance. If one has committed a sin, crime, or any misbehaviour, she or he may compensate for the sin by performing such an act.

[291] Biswas 2000. *Hatyā deoyā* is practised, for example, in Śaiva temples and shrines by female devotees of Śiva, who especially wish to have a male child (Maity 1989, 38). Manna discusses the possible connection between *hatyā deoyā* and belief in sanctity of the Earth. Manna suggests that *hatyā deoyā* is a means for the devotee to appeal to a divinity but at the same time it may be conceived as the presence of Mother Earth mediating strength and vitality (Manna 1993, 39).

[292] Daṇḍī is one name of the god Yama. In the form of Daṇḍī, Yama is the god of death and punisher of sinners (Biswas 2000).

quence. Some women recalled rumours of people who had failed in fulfilling their *mānasika*, and this had had severe effects on past generations.

### Assistance from a variety of deities

According to women interviewed, most newly married wives carry out rituals and revere gods and goddesses which are thought to have a positive impact on fertility and the power to grant children. Several women had asked the deities for a child. Suggestions of which deity one should turn to depended on the community, family, and personal preference. This is what some proposed:[293]

> Those who wish to have a baby, they can go to a god and pray for a child. I can pray to Mā Kālī, Śib, or any god. (Juri)
>
> Many people call on Ṣaṣṭhī to get a child. Some go to Lokenāth and give *mānata* to get a child.[294] I made Kārtikeya a pūjā for my son. God can give a child. (Sada)
>
> If one does not get a baby, there is Śib god, Śītalā Mā, and you can ask: Bhagavān, give me a child and I will give *pūjā* in your name.[295] (Sani)

Women suggested one or more gods and goddesses that one should turn to when hoping for child. While suggestions varied a great deal between individuals, some deities more than others seemed to be 'specialized' in issues concerning children, and some stood out as deities of

[293] Juri was interviewed on 11 March 2004 in Ganti, Sada on 1 March 2004 in Ganti, and Sani on 10 March 2004 in Harijan Basti.

[294] Bābā Lokenāth is a Bengali Hindu saint, ascetic and philosopher, whose followers usually consider him as a living god. In his popular icon – seen everywhere in Kolkata and hung also in the homes of my Ganti interviewees – he is portrayed as an ascetic sitting cross legged, hair pulled up and dressed in a saffron robe. Lokenāth was born of Brahman parents in 1730 and lived in a village outside Kolkata. His father wanted to dedicate one of his children to the path of renunciation in order to to liberate the family, and thus sent Lokenāth to the nearby village of Kochuya to study Hindu scriptures (*śāstra*) with a local pandit. The story tells that Lokenāth served his master, lived in the forests, meditated in the Himalayan mountains, and finally attained enlightenment at the age of ninety. After that he travelled westwards to Mecca and Israel. He returned to Bengal and set up his community (*āśrama*) in a small town close to Dhaka. People came to seek his wisdom and he was believed to be able to perform miracles. According to the legend, he lived to the age of 160 and died in 1890 meditating in a trance. Today, Lokenāth is a household deity for millions of Bengali families both in East and West Bengal. Lokenāth is usually understood to be an avatar of the god Śiva. According to the Ganti interviewee Rani, Lokenāth was a male servant of Śiva. Bābā Lokenāth is popular among all classes of Bengali society and members of the wealthy upper class spend fortunes on his offerings. It is not rare that during Lokenāth feasts – especially his birthday – people offer him golden articles and crowns. Some Ganti interviewees visited Kochuya for Lokenāth pūjā. In 1985, disciples of Bābā Lokenāth founded an organization called Lokenath Divine Life Mission. The organization spread the story and teachings of Bābā Lokenāth and engaged in charitable work. According to a well known story, Bābā Lokenāth also helped infertile women. It is told that infertile women often came to Bābā, begging to have children through his mercy and grace. Bābā took pity on these unfortunate women who longed to have a child. He blessed them saying: "You will be blessed with a child, and I shall come to your home as your child" (fieldwork diary, 18 January 2008; Lokenath Divine Life Mission).

[295] *Bhagavān* is a 'God', 'Lord', 'a revered person'; a term of address for God, saint, sages (Grimes 1996, 81). In this quote, it refers to any personal deity.

fertily. When a woman started to wish for offspring, the hope for a child was first expressed to those deities that the family regularly worshipped at home, even if the family deities were not among those gods and goddesses who were thought to have a particular interest in fertility and procreation.

Figure 11: Each family has a unique selection of deities represented in their homes.

During my stay in the houses of the interviewees, it became clear that each family and house had a unique selection of deities represented in their homes. Some divinities were popular and represented in most homes while others were known to a particular community or family only. The idols of the deities were placed at the home altar, in the corner or by the wall of the room, or in a separate god-room (usually called *ṭhākura-ghara* or *pūjā-ghara*). The most common visual representations of gods and goddesses were posters and photographs, statues, idols made of clay, brass, or other precious metal articles, earthen jars, cups, stones, plants, and dolls. Some divine representations had been contructed of varied incredients – such as clay, tree leaves and cloth – by the women themselves.[296] Deities were also represented in symbols and figures, such as *yantras* and *ālpanās*, which were drawn on the floor, wall, or at the entrance of the house. In Ganti and Janbazar people occasionally employed god effigies as part of their worship, for instance, during certain feasts or when completing *mānasika*. Apart from divine icons, people kept sacred items – amulets, sacred threads – given by a guru or holy men, or brought from a holy site, and

[296] Many of the goddess Mā Ṣaṣṭhī representations were constructed by women themselves, each Ṣaṣṭhī having special features.

considered them as representing either deities or the authority of the deity. The selection of the gods depended on the personal history of the family. It varied according to geographical and regional origins, caste and *jāti* background, orientation of the Hindu tradition of a family, as well as the religious and spiritual experiences of individual family members. Each deity fulfilled a distinct function in the family pantheon. Several women told how a certain incident in their lives had made them adopt a new deity who was believed to be specialized in dealing with their situation. For example, fear of infertility motivated women to seek assistance from deities with generative powers.

In addition to the deities present in the houses, some deities were worshipped outside the individual houses but in the immediate neighbourhood (*pāṛā*). Deities resided on god-bases (*ṭhākura-tala*), in separate godhouses (*ṭhākura-bāṛi*), and in shrines and temples. Some of these deities had qualities that for one reason or other were not welcomed inside the individual houses. Bali from Harijan Basti explained:[297] "We do not do Manasā pūjā at home, because Manasā is the goddess of snakes. She is an angry type of god". In Ganti, the godhouse of Manasā stood at the very centre of the neighbourhood, where people went to worship the goddess. Ganti interviewee Mila contended:[298] "No one makes *pūjā* for Manasā at home. You always do it at the Manasā temple."

In addition to gods revered by the family and deities worshipped in the immediate neighbourhood, most of the women interviewed went regularly or occasionally to give offerings to gods and goddesses that resided at nearby or distant sacred places (*tīrthas*) and influential temples. It was believed that one particular visual idol – statue, stone, or image – could possess greater authority and power than other idols of the same deity. Distant images were also invoked for their special domain of interest, for example, fertility or healing. Rani from Ganti was confident that she had had her children with the assistance of the goddess Pencho Bhāji:[299]

> There is one place called Kestopur (in North Kolkata). There is one goddess and due to her compassion I have got my children. They call her Pencho Bhāji.[300] She is a goddess

[297] Bali was interviewed on 9 February 2004 in Harijan Basti.

[298] Mila was interviewed on 28 January 2004 in Ganti.

[299] Rani was interviewed on 2 February 2004 in Ganti.

[300] Pencho Bhāji was worshipped by a few of my Ganti interviewees. According to them, the auspicious days for her worship were Saturdays and Tuesdays (*Śani-Maṅgalbār*). The goddess was offered only fried food, which is expressed also in her name Bhāji: The Bengali verb *bhājā* means 'to fry' and the noun refers to 'a dish of anything fried' (Biswas 2000). Rani mentioned that she had occasionally brought the effigy of the goddess into her house, but as the divinity is thought to crave blood, people believe that she should not be kept inside for more than one day. After the *pūjā* the effigy should be taken to the foot of a sacred tree. The goddess Bencho Bhāji was believed to have the power to grant children. Rani emphasized the importance of visiting the deity's temple during the fourth month of pregnancy to inform the goddess about the coming of a child (fieldwork diary, 12 January 2008). As regards Pencho Bhāji, my only source of information were my interviewees. It would be worth exploring the relationship of Pencho Bhāji, Bhāñjo, Panchuṭhākura, and Pancānanda. Basak introduces a fertility rite called Bhāñjo brata, which is observed by low castes and tribals in some districts of Bengal (Basak 2006, 138–139). The completing of the feast requires the sacrifice of a goat. Bhāñjo brata, according to Basak, is done to promote the fertility of both humans and the earth. Niyogi discusses the origin of the Pancānanda cult and mentions Pencho and Panchuṭhākura as folk deities that most probably influenced the development and

> who sees after children (*bācchāder najarer ṭhākura*).[301] One is supposed to go to her shrine (*ṭhākura-tala*). I went to see the shrine. Then I said, Mother (*Mā*), I have come to give a *pūjā* for you. I knew that she could give me a son or a daughter and I tied some brickbats inside the cloth and left them there. I got my children with the help of her.

Despite the great variety of divinities with distinct functions, most of the women interviewed had one or a few deities they preferred above others. They were referred to as *iṣṭadēbatā,* literally 'a desired', 'cherished', or 'worshipped deity'. Some interviewees had begun to worship their favourite personal deity in their parents' home before their marriage. Such a deity could be one of the family deities or one that a woman had become acquainted with through a certain incident in her life.

Yet, regardless of all the gods, goddesses, and their images, several women maintained that there was, however, only one god – usually called Bhagavān. This one God is manifested in numerous forms, and people approach this god by calling him or her various names. The idea is indeed in harmony with the understanding of Hindu thought in general. Harijan Basti interviewee Pho demonstrates the thought well:[302]

> We have one god, but one god has different forms (*rūpa*). Śītalā Mā, Mā Kālī, Mā Durgā, all of them are one. All of them are real forms of god. We call different gods by different names. I like all the gods.

The idea of the unity of all gods, as Pho demonstrated above, goes hand in hand with the idea that each deity has specific functions. The following divinities are specialized in the functions of fertility and children. I will start with sacred trees, which in general are thought to represent fertility.

## Sacred trees and fertility

In the research neigbourhoods and their neighbouring localities some trees represented more than just a tree; they were thought to be sacred.[303] For example, most Banyan trees (*baṭa*) around Ha-

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formation of Pancānanda (Niyogi 1987, 17, 22–23). According to Niyogi, Pencho is an awe-inspiring and destructive spirit or ghost rather than a deity. People propitiate him to avoid miscarriages and to cure babies with rickets. Niyogi states that Pancānanda has different qualities depending on the locality. For example, in the low caste area of South 24 Parganas the deity is worshipped in a particularly destructive and arrogant form, which reflects the character of Pencho. In some villages the protective qualities are emphasized and the deity is regarded as the attendant or son of Śiva. Niyogi mentions a birth ceremony called Pañcute, which is held on the fifth day after a baby is born in order to avoid the deity's evil affection for the baby. There is good reason to expect that the goddess Pencho Bhāji is somehow related to the deities mentioned above.

[301] The word *najara* is used of 'sight', 'vision', 'look', and 'glance', but also of 'evil eye' (Biswas 2000). It is difficult to translate the sentence accurately. It could mean "she is the goddess who sets her sights on children" or "she is the goddess who looks after children", or even "she is the goddess who casts evil eye on children".

[302] Pho gave her interview at her home in Harijan Basti the 4th of March, 2004.

[303] In the living quarters of Janbazar there was, however, no space for trees to grow. People named the species of sacred trees *baṭa* (ficus benghalensis) and *pipala* (ficus religiosa), both species of Banyan figs. People did not

rijan Basti were dedicated to the worship of Mā Śītalā and other deities.[304] Sacred trees were easy to recognize since people had decorated the trunks with threads and pieces of cloth, and there were signs of a red vermilion colour pasted on the trunk. A concrete base or platform had been placed at the foot of the trees (*baṭatalā*) and people brought items representing different deities, as well as articles used in conducting *pūjās*.[305] Many of the sacred banyan trees in Harijan Basti grew right next to or connected to the houses, but one tree that located by the main alley was a gathering place for the whole community. People celebrated their main festivals (*bāriyāri pūjā* or *pāṛār pūjā*) at the tree.[306]

Figure 12: Most Banyan trees around Harijan Basti are dedicated to the worship of goddess Mā Śītalā and other deities.

necessarily distinguish between these two species. Both trees are worshipped throughout India, and among other functions they are connected to fertility (Maity 1989, 184–185; Parpola 2005, 72).

[304] In the villages Mā Śītalā is commonly worshipped without a shrine but beside the Banyan trees (see, for example, Mahapatra 1972, 146). According to Maity, Banyan trees in general are associated with gods such as Brahmā, Lakṣmī, Kṛṣṇa, and in Bengal especially with Mā Ṣaṣṭhī (Maity 1989, 185–186).

[305] According to Parpola, Banyan trees with a base at the foot were already portayed in Harappan seals and amulets. There were also references to the worship of sacred trees in the earliest Vedas. Further elaborations of tree cults are found in Jātaka-stories starting from the 4th century AD. According to the Jātakas, sacred trees were given offerings and they were asked to give the worshippers children. In Parpola's view, the origin of tree worship in present-day India is directly connected with the cultures of the Indus valley and neolithic villages (Parpola 2005, 72).

[306] Fieldwork diary, 30 September 2003.

It is generally agreed that tree cults worldwide have a connection with fertility in general and human fertility in particular. In the Bengal region, for example, the *pipala* tree (also known as *aśvattha*) is worshipped by womenfolk – especially by barren women hoping for children.[307] It is common to the tree cults to believe that "either the tree spirit or the deity connected with a particular tree or plant blesses the childless with offspring" (Maity 1989, 178–179). Several of my interviewees mentioned the custom of turning to a sacred tree to ask for a child. According to Abbott, trees in Indian practices are recognized for their innate power "rather than the divinity which popular belief has attributed to certain particular trees" (Abbott 2000, 315). In his view, "certain trees are the abode of gods" and "from constant contact with the divinity of a god […] trees acquire special *śakti*", yet, "in general, the term deity (*dēba*) is not applied to trees" (Abbott 2000, 315). It is thus through the transfer of the *śakti* of the tree that a woman is believed to be made fruitful.[308] Maity supports the view that tree worship is connected with the worship of village deities (*grāmadēbatā*).[309] He refers to the study on South Indian villages which shows that in a number of villages, *grāmadēbatā* has no other representation than a tree. In such villages the tree itself is regarded as the embodiment of the deity and it receives all acts of worship which are meant for the deity.[310] Based on my observances made on women's tree worship practices I assume that many women not only revered trees for their power (*śakti*) but considered sacred trees as deities themselves. Branches of sacred trees were also taken to represent divinity in some domestic rituals.

Sacred trees are located in the immediate proximity of most Hindu temples, or, to put it another way, temples are built in the proximity of sacred trees which are believed to be particularly powerful.[311] To express desires, cravings, or as a sign of attendance to a vow or promise (*mānasika*), people tie threads, rags, or decorative cloths to the branches of sacred trees. Some use mere thread and others tie small stones, brickbats, sweetmeats, or small idols inside the thread or piece of cloth.[312] The item inside the thread has symbolic value as the object of the wish. It is thought that the thread (and the item tied to it) both reminds and coerces the deity of the tree to grant the relief or desire asked for. Tying threads is also commonly believed to influence the transfer of evil effects, and thus, for example, to cure illnesses. The transference of evil, according to Ab-

[307] One rural fertility custom of Bengali childless women and of those women whose offspring have died after birth is to plant *aśvattha* trees. The procedure of the practice follows the same logic that underlies the making of *mānasika* in general. In Maity's account of the practice "a childless person vows to the god Nārāyaṇa saying that if he is blessed with a child, he will plant a tree of *aśvattha.* Similarly a person whose wife gives birth to stillborn children or whose offspring dies after birth, also makes *mānata* to Nārāẏaṇa saying that if he is blessed with long-lived children he will plant a tree of *aśvattha.* Whenever a person is blessed with his desired object, he is to plant a tree of *aśvattha.* This rite is called Bṛkṣa-Pratiṣṭhā, literally observance of tree vow" (Maity 1989, 184–185). According to another fertility custom related to *aśvattha* trees in particular, an unproductive woman has to go barefoot round the tree a hundred times a day. After being blessed with a child she is to hang a cradle on the tree (Abbott 2000, 322).

[308] Abbott 2000, 321.

[309] Maity 1989, 183.

[310] Maity 1989, 183–184.

[311] Maity 1989, 183.

[312] About the practice see, for example, Mahapatra 1972, 142; Maity 1989, 153.

bott, happens in a way that "in the presence of the sick a thread is taken and by the recital of charms the evil *śakti* which causes the illness is brought into the thread, which is then tied to the tree" (Abbott 2000, 327).

According to the interviewees, tying threads to sacred trees was also a common practice of those women who were hoping to have a child. Many mentioned the practice of childless women tying stones and brickbats inside the threads and rags. The item inside the thread was said to symbolize the hoped-for child and the thread or cloth the womb of a mother. Women explained that the practice was meant to remind the deity of the tree about the wish for a child or to fulfil a previous promise. Tying threads is also practised for the protection of an unborn child and for a safe delivery.[313]

Some important trees of fertility are located by special sacred places called *śākta pīṭhas*.[314] One of the most renowned sacred places (*pīṭha*) in Kolkata is the Kalighat temple of Mā Kālī. Right next to the temple building where the famous effigy of black Kālī resides, stands the sacred Banyan tree. The tree receives a constant flow of devotees, who come to bow down to the deities of fertility. During my fieldwork, I spent time observing people who came to visit the tree.[315] I also interviewed priests and priestesses (*pūjāris*) who conducted *pūjās* for devotees, received gifts people had brought to the deities of the tree, and receited *mantras* against payment on request. One priest pointed out that the tree actually represented five distinct mother goddesses, Mā Ṣaṣṭhī, Mā Manasā, Śītalā Mā, Mā Maṅgalcaṇḍī, and Mā Gaṅgā, and the devotee could pray to whichever goddess was best known and dearest to the devotee. The tree was decorated with flowers and clothes, and countless brickbats tied with red and yellow threads hung from the branches. At the foot of the tree lay three oval shaped black stones bordered by flower garlands. I was told that the stones, similarly to the tree, represented goddesses.[316] Both men and women visited the sacred tree. In exchange for their gifts, priests and priestesses drew an auspicious mark (*ṭikā*) on their foreheads as a sign of blessing (*āśīrbāda*), gave them holy water (*gaṅgājala*) and a flower. Priests and priestesses also had the role of instructing people in proper behaviour when close to the tree. People often came to pray for a child or for the well-being of a child, but for other purposes as well. Some women had brought the tree a statue (*mūrti*) of Mā Ṣaṣṭhī. Temple servants had placed the statues at the parting of the tree trunk to remind the goddess of the longing of her devotees.

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[313] Abbott 2000, 326–328.

[314] *Śākta pīṭha* is a term given to a group of Hindu sacred places scattered throughout the subcontinent. These places are usually called *pīṭha-sthān* or *mahā-pīṭha* in Bengali. The word *pīṭha* means 'altar', 'seat', or 'sacred spot where the body parts of the goddess Satī fell to earth after she had been cut to pieces by the discus of Viṣṇu'. Tradition has it that there are fifty-one places of *śākta pīṭhas*. There is, however, no consensus on the exact locations of these *pīṭhas*. The most popular text that mentions the names of these *pīṭhas* is an old manuscript called the *Mahāpīṭhanirūpaṇa* (1690–1720 AD). The *pīṭhas* situated in greater Bengal and the surrounding areas seem to be concentrated in a cluster. At least thirteen *pīṭhas* are situated in the Bengali-speaking areas of today's West Bengal and Bangladesh (see, for example, Banerjee 2002, 42–44; Banglapedia; Sircar 2004).

[315] Fieldwork diary, 20 January 2008.

[316] This view is supported, for example, by McDaniel 2004, 28.

Mā Ṣaṣṭhī: Bengali goddess of fertility and children

As mentioned, women in all three communities worshipped various forms and epithets of the goddess. The two main groups of goddesses were the well-known female consorts of great male deities and both benign and ferocious forms of goddesses that were all referred to by the epithet Mother (*Mā*).[317] While some divine consorts – for example, Lakṣmī – were occasionally called Mother, women worshipped a number of mother goddesses that shared some qualities different from the consort deities. Namely, these goddesses were mainly associated with fertility and protection. The idea of a mother goddess as a deity of fertility and protection developed early in primitive societies. Even though most present-day mother goddesses have gone through a chain of transformations, reconstructions, and reinterpretations, the original concept of them still prevails. Consequently, most mother goddesses worshipped by my interviewees were either associated with illness and disasters, and were revered for the sake of protection from these, or the mother goddesses were considered as guardians of fertility and thus important agencies for women hoping for a child.[318]

As part of the interviews I enquired about what one should do if a woman wishes to have a baby or if she has difficulties in becoming pregnant. A common answer given especially by women of the Bengali community was that one should give *pūjā* for Mā Ṣaṣṭhī, whom they regarded as the goddess of fertility and children.[319] The women of all three communities had a different view of the worship of Mā Ṣaṣṭhī. Most Gantian interviewees, who were of Bengal origin, worshipped Ṣaṣṭhī by carefully observing *bratas* and birth rites associated with her, and by seeking her help and assistance in questions related to childbirth and the well-being of their children. Also, some women of Harijan Basti had adopted Ṣaṣṭhī worship, which had fused with their Oriyan customs. Harijan Basti interviewee Pho explained their relation to Ṣaṣṭhī worship as follows:[320]

> Some people make Ṣaṣṭhīpūjā on the sixth day after the birth of the baby. Yet, I do not make it. In our neighbourhood no one does it. Bengalis make Ṣaṣṭhīpūjās. We have different rules of ritual conduct (*niyama*), but it happens that our *niyama* gets mixed with the *niyama* of Bengalis and they have become one.

[317] The most popular consort goddesses among my interviewees were Lakṣmī (Śrī), Rādhā, Pārvatī; important mother goddesses were Śītalā Mā, Mā Manasā, Mā Kālī, Mā Ṣaṣṭhī, Santoṣī Mā, Caṇḍī, Maṅgalcaṇḍī, Mā Tārā, and Mā Tāriṇī.

[318] Banerjee 2002, 32–33.

[319] Goddess Ṣaṣṭhī, as the protecting deity of children and bestower of offspring, has a long history in the Bengal region. Evidence shows that the goddess was originally worshipped by the tribal community or the pre-Aryan population in general, and only later was she given a place among the Brahmanical deities. Ṣaṣṭhī is referred to in a few later Purāṇas and in mediaeval Bengali literature, particularly in Maṅgala-Kābyas (Bandopadhyay 1966, 158; Maity 1989, 66).

[320] Pho was interviewed in Harijan Basti on 4 March 2004.

Even though Pho claimed that no woman in Harijan Basti abided by Ṣaṣṭhī worship, the closer investigation of the issue proved otherwise. The adoption of Ṣaṣṭhī worship in Harijan Basti had reached the point where several women had started to celebrate Nīl Ṣaṣṭhī brata. In Janbazar, Sumi, the solitary Bengali within the foreign community, followed the Ṣaṣṭhī worship tradition of her family whereas the others thought along the same lines as Praba:[321] "We do not perform Ṣaṣṭhīpūjās. In Bihar we perform Chhaṭḥpūjās". Ṣaṣṭhī and Chhaṭḥ rites have enough features in common to consider them as related:[322] Both *ṣaṣṭha* (Bengali) and *chhaṭḥa* (Hindi) refer to the ordinal number 'sixth', which marks the timing of both the Ṣaṣṭhī and Chhaṭḥ *bratas*.[323] The interviews showed that while they have particular characteristics of their own, the birth rites of Ṣaṣṭhī and Chhaṭḥi also have many similarities: They were both thought to mark the ending of the impurity after childbirth and after the baby's birth had been made public. In her study on women's *vratas* (*bratas*) in a North Indian city, Pearson mentions several Chhaṭḥ *vratas,* which, similarly to Ṣaṣṭhī worship, are all connected to fertility, protection of children, and the well-being of sons.[324] Singh makes a point of not confusing the *pūjās* and *bratas* of the goddesses Ṣaṣṭhī and Chhaṭḥi with the great sun goddess festival of Chhaṭḥa pūjā.[325] Nevertheless, the connection between the Ṣaṣṭhī and Chhaṭḥa pūjās supposedly exists. In Basak's view the Chhaṭḥa pūjā was originally born from the Sūrya Ṣaṣṭhī ritual.[326]

Most Bengali women engage in Ṣaṣṭhī worship after their marriage.[327] Goddess Mā Ṣaṣṭhī is regarded as the provider and protector of children, who is believed to assist women as they aim at having and nurturing children. Even though my interviewees did not mention a connection between Mā Ṣaṣṭhī and a male god, some Bengalis and literary sources consider the goddess as the consort of the god Kārtikeya.[328] The Ṣaṣṭhī worship of my interviewees involved rituals (such as Nīl Ṣaṣṭhī brata) that were performed with calendric regularity (*nitya*), as well as rituals celebrating childbirth (*nāimittika*) and rituals performed voluntarily (*kāmya*) in order to ask the

[321] Praba was interviewed at her home in Janbazar on 11 February and 5 March 2004.

[322] The connection between Ṣaṣṭhī and Chhaṭḥi is discussed, for example, by Singh 2010; Uusikylä 2000, 183; Wadley 1980, 45.

[323] Stevenson, in describing Gujarati Brahmans' birth rites, mensions 'Mother Sixth', who is worshipped on the sixth day of the baby's birth (Stevenson 1920, 9–10).

[324] Pearson 1996, 235–236.

[325] Singh 2010, 59–80.

[326] Basak 2006, 156.

[327] One of the most popular Ṣaṣṭhī *bratas* among Bengalis is Araṇya Ṣaṣṭhī brata (also called Jāmāi Ṣaṣṭhī brata), which is performed at the sixth *tithi* of the bright half (*śukla pakṣa*) of Jaiṣṭha month. On that day the son-in-law is invited to his in-laws to be treated and blessed by the mother-in-law who wishes him a good family life with progeny by the grace of Mā Ṣaṣṭhī. According to Maity, this *brata* "is observed in most of Bengali families for first few years after the marriage of a daughter till a child is born" (Maity 1989, 66–67; see also Bhattāchārya, P., 57–62; Bhattāchārya, S., 43–45; Kabiratna, 47–51). My interviewees, however, did not mention the observance of this ritual in their communities.

[328] Fieldwork diary, 17 January 2008. The connection of Kārtikeya and Ṣaṣṭhī is shown, for example, in the term *guha*. Guha is one name for the god Kārtikeya but it also refers to the sixth day of the lunar fortnight of the month of Agrahāyaṇa (from the middle of November to the middle of December), the day that Ṣaṣṭhī *brata* is also conducted (Bhattāchārya P. 133–136, 154–157; Bhattāchārya, S. 94–96; Biswas 2000; Kabiratna 119–120).

goddess Ṣaṣṭhī for an offspiring or for protection of one's children.[329] The Ṣaṣṭhī worship that follows the Hindu almanac (*pañjikā*) usually occurs either on the sixth day of the bright (*śukla pakṣa*) or dark half (*kṛṣṇa pakṣa*) of each lunar month.[330]

The symbolism and visual images related to Mā Ṣaṣṭhī are rich and varied. Most of the interviewees worshipping Mā Ṣaṣṭhī said that the goddess does not have an image or form as most gods or goddesses have. Some explained that if they prayed to Ṣaṣṭhī they constructed an idol which they then considered as Ṣaṣṭhī.[331] Ganti interviewee Juri mentioned that her family had many Ṣaṣṭhī pūjās, which they usually celebrated with tiny statues of Ṣaṣṭhī made of mud.[332] Everyday tools were also taken to represent the goddess, which can well be understood as both a sign of an uncomplicated relationship and intimacy between the women and the goddess, and as an expression of the women's constant concern for their children. Among my interviewees one common representation of Ṣaṣṭhī was a clay pot filled with water and Banyan tree leaves or branches.[333] The clay pot was transformed into the goddess when the women applied the mark of vermilion on it. During certain Ṣaṣṭhī pūjās women prepared sweetmeats and put them around the pot. The sweets were thought to represent children whom people brought to the feet of Ṣaṣṭhī when seeking the deity's protection for their children.

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[329] This classification of rituals into duty-born, regular (*nitya*), occasional (*nāimittika*), and voluntary (*kāmya*) is not necessarily accurate. A ritual may well be both voluntary and performed out of obligation. For example, Aśok Ṣaṣṭhī brata is basically thought to be a voluntary (*kāmya*) ritual which is observed on the sixth day of the bright half of Phālgun (from the middle of February to the middle of March) or Caitra (from the middle of March to the middle of April) by a woman wishing to have a child. As the production of offspring is expected of married women, Aśok Ṣaṣṭhī brata, a ritual for increasing one's fertility, is not purely voluntary. It is performed out of the duty and obligation to conceive. Neither does voluntary mean that when conducting a rite a devotee is free to do as she wishes. Besides timing, the Aśok Ṣaṣṭhī brata has other conventions that votaries are expected to comply with. During the *brata,* women are supposed to eat a red-coloured flower called Aśokphul. The colour of the flower symbolizes menstruation blood and is believed to contribute to the fertility of a woman (I was told by my Bengali friends that nowadays there is also an Aśok extract available which is used as medicine for those hoping for a child). Thus, voluntary observance is in fact often performed out of obligation by following precise rules and order (on Aśok Ṣaṣṭhī brata, see Bhattāchārya P. 174–179; Bhattāchārya, S. 145–147; Kabiratna 133–134; Mahapatra 1972, 144).

[330] The phases of the moon in the Hindu almanac are called *tithis*. One complete cycle of the moon consists of thirty *tithis*. There are fifteen *tithis* in the periods of both the bright and dark fortnight. The waxing phase – the bright half – of the moon in Bengali is referred to as *śukla pakṣa*, and the waning phase – the dark half – as *kṛṣṇa pakṣa* (Channa 1984, 118; Pearson 1996, 235; Stewart 1998, 352).

[331] In different *bratas* Mā Ṣaṣṭhī manifests herself in diverse ways. Common representations of the goddess are sacred designs (*ālpanā*) drawn on the ground for demarcation of the sacred space. Ṣaṣṭhī also has various three dimensional representations. For example, in Cāpaḍā (or Manthān) Ṣaṣṭhī brata, the goddess is thought to be present in the water that rises from the tank or pond dug in the ground for the ritual celebration (Stewart 1998, 353). The construction of Mā Ṣaṣṭhī can also be very elaborate. For example, during Araṇya Ṣaṣṭhī brata, Ṣaṣṭhī may be represented as a construct of soft clay, the branch of a bamboo tree, betel leaves and nuts, and plantains placed on a small wooden board, wrapped in yellow cloth and tied together by a thread (Mahapatra 1972, 142–143).

[332] Juri was interviewed on 11 March 2004. Common representations of Mā Ṣaṣṭhī are also clay and terracotta articles and figurines (Mahapatra 1972, 142). In her protective aspect, the goddess is represented, for example, in the form of a cow skull, bamboo churning stick, or millstone (McDaniel 2004, 65).

[333] According to Stewart, a clay pot is a widely used representation of Ṣaṣṭhī (Stewart 1998, 353).

According to Fruzzetti, common everyday tools that represent Ṣaṣṭhī are a combination of a grinding stone and pestle (*śil norā*).[334] The ginding stone (*śil*) is usually placed upright against the wall and the pestle (*norā*) stands next to it. These two are not separated. Together they express the mother-child bond and represent Ṣaṣṭhī and her children. This symbolism is displayed especially at marriage rituals. Accoring to common custom, a small child is made to sit on the lap of both bride and groom on the ninth day after the marriage. This is done to ask Ṣaṣṭhī to bestow a new male line on the couple. On that occasion bride and child are thought to stand for Ṣaṣṭhī and her children. Sometimes a grinding stone without the pestle is used to substitute for the child.[335]

Women remarked that in the villages of their origin the goddess Ṣaṣṭhī was usually thought to reside at a shrine called *Ṣaṣṭhī-tala.* In urban areas the goddess was most often found in Kālī and Śiva temples where she had her own place (*thāna*). Mā Ṣaṣṭhī was usually represented in the temples either as a stone with vermilion applied on it or as a Banyan tree.

Even though other manifestations of Ṣaṣṭhī were much more common, some women recognized human-like features of Mā Ṣaṣṭhī as well. The husband of Ganti interviewee Mila was a professional artisan of god effigies (*mūrti*) who made Ṣaṣṭhī statues on request. I also found anthropomorphic Ṣaṣṭhī statues at stalls located next to some influential temples in Kolkata. The anthropomorphic imagery of the goddess portrays her as a beautiful young woman holding a baby on her lap and riding on a cat.[336] An anthropomorphic image indicates a rise inthe status of the deity. When originally tribal folk goddesses ascend to the category of more 'important' deities, they are usually allowed an anthropomorphic shape.[337] This has also happened with the goddessess Mā Śītalā and Caṇḍī, both of which were worshipped by my interviewees. They were formerly mere aniconic divinities worshipped in the form of sacred trees, stones and water jars, to name but a few of their representations, but nowadays their anthropomorphic features are well established.[338] In Harijan Basti and Ganti it was clear that the visual imaginery of Mā Ṣaṣṭhī and Mā Śītalā were in a state of gradual change. While the traditional manifestations of the goddesses remained, their anthropomorphic imagery had already been established. For example, in both Harijan Basti and Ganti the goddess Mā Śītalā was worshipped in the form of sacred trees, but newly constructed temples were inhabited by the human-like effigy of Mā Śītalā.

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[334] Fruzzetti 1982, 158. *Śil norā* is required in preparing spices for cooking. The *śil* is a flat stone and *norā* a kind of cylinder. The whole fresh spices are placed on the *śil,* and the *norā* is used for crushing the spices and for making a paste used in cooking curries.

[335] Fruzzetti 1982, 54.

[336] The anthropomorphic image of Ṣaṣṭhī was photographed by Maity in 1989, Plate II(a).

[337] In portraying the process of tribal goddesses moving upward, McDaniel notes that in the earliest stage the goddess is aniconic and is thought to be manifested either in a stone, lake, unusual tree, pile of earth, or cowdung. The upward movement begins as the stone (or other object) is moved by devotees to, for example, a sacred grove, then to an altar or shrine, and then to a small temple, and to yet a larger temple. Along with the Brahmanical Hindu influence, some goddesses are given human features and personification, and they appear as an anthropomorphic statue among other gods and goddesses, the stone, however, still remaining at the foot of the effigy. The upward movement is also expressed in the gradual shift of the god-base from outdoors to indoors, or from water to land (McDaniel 2004, 28–29).

[338] Manna 1993, 107–115; Sarkar 1986, 80.

Figure 13: Mā Ṣaṣṭhī, the goddess of fertility and children

As already mentioned, the goddess Ṣaṣṭhī in her anthropomorphic form is portrayed as riding on a cat. Her vehicle (*bāhana*) is generally known to be a cat.[339] In Bengali Hindu religious poems, Maṅgala-Kābyas (Auspicious poems) of Ṣaṣṭhī, the function of Ṣaṣṭhī and the cat is understood dialectically; the cat steals the children and Ṣaṣṭhī restores them to their mother.[340]

[339] During the fieldwork I heard various folk beliefs related to cats. In India there are countless semi-domestic street cats that, not having an owner, survive by their natural instincts, some of them, aided by animal loving people. They are generally considered as bothersome creatures and it is acceptable to harass them and chase them away if they enter one's yard. However, according to a common belief, one should not kill a cat, because it is thought to bring a person bad luck (fieldwork diary, 17 January 2008).

[340] Maṅgala-Kābyas are a group of religious texts of Bengali Hindus, composed in the Middle Ages, mainly between the 13th and 18th centuries. The poems glorify and argue for the superiority of particular indigenous

The psychology of the dialectics may be interpreted to mean that the cat symbolizes women's fear of losing a child or of an evil influence falling on the child, and Ṣaṣṭhī, the benign divine mother, in turn, brings relief from fear by protecting the child. My interviewees interpreted the connection between the goddess and cat also in a different manner. Ṣaṣṭhī was thought to be a mother goddess not only of human beings but also of animals. It was believed that Ṣaṣṭhī protected all babies, including animal babies. Among my interviewees, the cat as Ṣaṣṭhī's vehicle was mainly found in the context of a *brata* performance in which devotees drew sacred designs (*ālpanās*) depicting the goddess with her cat.

Ethnographers and anthropologists have discussed the connection between Mā Ṣaṣṭhī and other local goddesses with similar roles as protectresses and goddesses of fertility. Wadley argues that the smallpox goddess Mā Śītalā of Hindi-speaking North India has been influenced by Bengali Ṣaṣṭhī.[341] This is shown by the congruent dietary habits of the two goddesses and by the development of ritual stories (*bratakathās*) in which their characteristics tend to mingle.[342] Fruzzetti, for her part, suggests that "Mā Ṣaṣṭhī and Lakṣmī are a single female divinity, aspects which are projected as one or the other goddess in specific circumstances" (Fruzzetti 1982, 158). Fruzzetti discusses the function of the two in the context of marriage rituals where the bride is identified both as Lakṣmī, the goddess of wealth, and as Mā Ṣaṣṭhī, the divine mother of children. In the aspect of Ṣaṣṭhī the bride is seen as the granter of wealth for her husband's line.[343]

In the Bengali context Mā Ṣaṣṭhī is most often associated with the popular snake goddess Mā Manasā, one of the deities worshipped by my Ganti interviewees.[344] In addition to other functions, women associated Mā Manasā – similar to Mā Ṣaṣṭhī – with the bearing and protection

deities of rural Bengal, the most important being Manasā, Caṇḍī (often called Kālī or Kālikā in the texts), and Dharmaṭhākur. *Ṣaṣṭhī-Maṅgal* is one of the minor Maṅgala-Kābyas, one of the most important being *Ṣaṣṭhī-maṅgal of Kabi Kṛṣṇa-Rāma-Dāsa* (Banerjee 2002, 34; Dimock 1971, 218; Mc Daniel 2004, 2; Sur 1992, 92–95).

[341] Wadley 1980, 44–48.

[342] Women's ritual guides and storybooks (*Meyedera Bratakathā*) mention Śītalā Ṣaṣṭhī brata. It is worth noting that the ritual rules order devotees to give Mā Ṣaṣṭhī food offerings that are usually given to Mā Śītalā (Bhattāchārya P. G., 175; Wadley 1980, 47).

[343] Fruzzetti 1982, 84.

[344] See, for example, Dimock 1971, 217.

of children, and the goddess was thought to have great regenerating powers.[345] Ganti interviewee Pura said that she approached Mā Manasā when she wanted a child:[346]

> I was hoping for a child, but the baby did not come immediately. I went to the house of Manasā (*Manasā bāṛi*) in Howrah. When I went there I cried: "Mother, there is some unrest at my home. If you have son or daughter, please, give one for me". After doing that I got a child.

[345] In his study on the cult of the goddess Manasā, Maity points out that the worship of the snake as a symbol of fertility is an ancient practice among peoples throughout the world. He concludes that the association of the snake goddess Manasā with the fertility of both humans and the earth is unquestionable. While the main motive for Manasā worship has been fear of snakes and the avoidance of harm caused by snakes, Mā Manasā has been worshipped as the goddess of human fertility in some parts of Bengal since the 9th or 10th century AD and the practice is still current. In Maity's view, Manasā's power over fertility is, among other things, manifested by the importance of her worship before the marriage ceremony (Maity 1966, 43–46, 269; Maity 1989, 70–81). In discussing Manasā worship, McDaniel emphasizes other aspects than the fertility aspect of the goddess (McDaniel 2003, 55-57; 2004, 148–156).

[346] Pura was interviewed in Ganti, on 2 February 2004.

Figure 14: Shrine of snake goddess Mā Manasā in Ganti

What distinguished Manasā from Mā Ṣaṣṭhī is her potentially malevolent and demanding character:[347] Manasā is thought to take life and restore it with seeming arbitrariness whereas Ṣaṣṭhī is never considered as malevolent but always graceful and merciful. The protective and de-

[347] The following story of Mā Manasā by my Ganti interviewee Bu gives some hint about the potentially malevolent and demanding nature of the goddess: "We have a family tradition of doing Manasā pūjā at our (worship) place of Manasā (*Manasā tala*). Once, a big snake (Manasā) rose up from the pond. The father-in-law of my elder brother went to speak to the snake. He said, Mother, please tell what is happening to us. He repeated it again and again: Mother, please tell us, Mother, please tell us. And then Mother started to speak: There is destructive (*atyācāra*) behavior here. Then he (father-in-law) asked: What kind? Mother said: You are going to my place (*sthān*) with an impure body. Ladies with menstruation are going to the place of god (*ṭhākura-sthān*). Then the snake returned to the pond. After that, we started to do the Manasā pūjā as though we were bathing in the river Ganges (*gaṅgā kore*)". Bu was interviewed at her home in Ganti on 1 March 2004.

structive powers of Manasā and Ṣaṣṭhī can also be understood as complementary. In practice, Manasā and Ṣaṣṭhī are often worshipped in the same shrine on temple grounds.

### Worship with a statue: the God Kārtikeya

Besides distinct divinities associated with fertility, it was common among my interviewees to approach divinities that represented ideals women wished to see in their hoped-for children. The god Kārtikeẏa combined both aspects.[348] Kārtikeya – a deity devoutly worshipped especially by the women of Ganti – was revered both for the sake of children, particularly for the birth of sons, and for the qualities he stood for.[349] As the son of Śiva and Pārvatī, and brother of Lord Gaṇeśa, Kārtikeya – bachelor god and commander-in-chief of heavenly forces – is usually portrayed carrying an arrow and a bow in his two hands and riding on a peacock.[350] The women interviewed for my study portrayed Kārtikeẏa as appealing in appearance, and despite his association with war and battle, his nature was thought to be tender, youthful, and loving. The women wanted Kārtikeya to bestow these same qualities on their sons, and thus appealed to the deity. In exchange for these qualities they celebrated *pūjās* with human-like statues (*mūrti*) of Kārtikeya and offered gifts to the deity.

[348] Interviewees also called Kārtikeya by the name Kārtika. Kārtika is the name of a Bengali month (running from the middle of October to the middle of November) and the usual time for conducting *bratas* and *pūjās* for Kārtikeya. The way women portrayed the god Kārtika, it became obvious to me that they were indeed referring to Kārtikeya. Kutir's dictionary explains that Kārtika is, besides the name of a month, a proper noun of Kārtikeya (Kutir 2007, 221; Maity 1989, 63). The name Kārtikeya derives from an original myth according to which Skanda, son of Śiva, was nursed by six nymphs, *kṛttikā* (Parpola 2005, 132). The Kārtika cult among Benaresi women has recently been studied by Pintchman (2005).

[349] Maity refers to the academic discussion on the history of Kārtikeya, which has concluded that Kārtikeya is of non-Aryan origin, having an independent personality since a very early stage of his worship (Maity 1989, 61). Later on the qualities of Kārtikeya were aryanized and the deity was incorporated into Brahmanical Hinduism. Chatterjee maintains that *Skanda-Kārtikeya* became popular during the composition of late Vedic writings and remained so throughout the formation of the epic and Puranic works (Chatterjee 1970, 6). According to Maity, in modern Bengal Kārtikeya is worshipped for three purposes: 1) for the removal of barrenness, 2) for the general welfare of children, and 3) for the preservation of youth and beauty of Kolkatan public women (Maity 1989, 65). The third purpose has likely something to do with the view that Kārtikeya as a barchelor god is fond of women.

[350] Kārtikeya is worshipped in many names and aspects such as Skanda, Guha, Kumāra, Dēba-Senāpati and Ṣaṛānana. In South India, particularly in the state of Tamil Nadu, Kārtikeya is known as Murugan (Biswas 2000; Maity 1989, 61).

Figure 15: By worshipping god Kārtikeya women wanted to bestow good qualities on their sons.

The main annual Kārtikeya brata is held on the last day of the month of Kārtika, although women hoping to have a son approach the deity throughout the year by taking an effigy of the god to their home, and worshipping the image and bringing it gifts.[351] As the husband of Ganti interviewee Mila made god statues at their home, Mila had frequently witnessed women from the surrounding areas coming to get Kārtikeya statues. Mila also performed Kārtikeya pūjās for women, especially when they wanted to fulfil their *mānasika*. She shared her experience as follows:[352]

> Those who have difficulties in getting a child go to a god and give *mānata*. They tell the god: I have not got a child. If I get a child, I will give you a *pūjā* with a statue (*mūrti*). Many come to ask for a god (statue) from us and they make *pūjā* with it. They just drop in without informing us. They come with a letter written to the god Kārtika. Sometimes as many as five women come together and give a letter to the statue of Kārtika. They also bring money. They make *pūjā* for Kārtika. Year after year they do it, and when they get a child I make Kārtika pūjā for them. At that time they want to make a big *pūjā* with two effigies. Once there were four ladies who had not yet had a child. They made Kārtika pūjā and said to the deity: *Bābā*, I want a son like you are. They also gave *mānata*. When they had done this *pūjā* for two to three years, they got a son, and

[351] Maity mentions a custom of childless couples to abide by certain restrictions and approach Kārtikeya from the first to the last day of the month of Kārtika (Maity 1989, 63).

[352] Mila was interviewed at her home in Ganti on 28 January 2004.

they were so happy. When such a thing happens, many give *pūjā* with the accompaniment of drumming and music (*ḍhāka-ḍhola*).[353]

Worship of temporary anthropomorphic god statues was a common practice in all the fieldwork sites.[354] Families worshipped individually if they wanted to approach a certain deity for personal reasons, and it was done together for certain community feasts.[355] The statue is also required for the *pūjā* when a person or family must fulfil their *mānasika*. An effigy is a concrete way to make the deity visible (*darśana deoyā*), and its purchase is also understood as a sign of loyalty and devotedness. The image is treated like an honourable guest; it is entertained and fed, and offerings and sacrificial gifts are placed directly at its feet. When the feast is over, the effigy is left at the foot of a sacred tree or it is given a farewell by immersing it into a river, pond, or lake. At my fieldwork sites it was obvious that the way the statues were treated and addressed showed that they were understood to be the gods themselves who had come to visit during the *pūjā* or feast.

Temporary human-featured god statues are worshipped on all levels of the Hindu community in West Bengal; in my view it is an important way of participating in the society and even showing off. Statues are made by highly-skilled professional artisans who are aware of the timing of each feast and the unique features of each divinity. The variety in size, detail, and decoration of the god statues is overwhelming. During my fieldwork members of the Harijan Basti neighbourhood put considerable effort into organizing imposing community feasts with temporary statues and shrines. I interpreted this as the wish to show their neighbourhood that they were moving up from their low status and ignorant ways.

Santoṣī Mā: the movie 'mother of satisfaction'

In the course of my fieldwork, it became obvious that the nationwide rise of the goddess Santoṣī Mā had not passed unnoticed among the women of low caste Kolkatan communities. While Santoṣī Mā is not thought to be exclusively a goddess of fertility or a goddess of children,

[353] *Ḍhāka* is a large drum and *ḍhola* a kind of barrel, accompanying instruments of the music of the villages and religious feasts (Biswas 2000).

[354] During the fieldwork I was shown a number of temporary statues (*mūrti*) that women interviewed and their families and communities were using for worship. These represented several main divinities as well as minor ones, yet not all the deities had such temporary *mūrti*. The duration of the usage of a temporary effigy varied depending on the divinity and the purpose of its use. The statue was usually purchased for the duration of a certain feast, but it could be kept for longer period of time as well. Temporary god statues – Kārtikeya, Mā Ṣaṣṭhī, Mā Manasā – were also used by women hoping for a child. Ganti interviewee Parbo had used a temporary statue of Gaur Nitai when praying for a child. Gaur Nitai is a pair of deities of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism. Gaur refers to an ascetic Vaiṣṇava monk Chaitanya, whom his followers revere as an incarnation of Kṛṣṇa, and Nitai to his adherent Nityānanda. Parbo described the worship: "One can have Gaur Nitai made if one wishes to have a child. One hides the money and leaves it there (for the statue). One should not hand it to the image and no one should see it. Many people do this if they want a child. I also got one child after finishing Gaur Nitai". Parbo was interviewed on 8 January 2004 at her home in Ganti.

[355] In Janbazar temporary statues were mainly used during the community celebrations.

many of my interviewees suggested that she was the deity to turn to if someone wanted a child. Some women in both Janbazar and Harijan Basti made it known that they had started to do *pūjās* for Santoṣī Mā; they could not precisely explain where and how they had adopted the worship of this deity, but most said that they had learned to do her *pūjā* through a personal acquaintance. One of the interviewees considered Santoṣī Mā her dearest personal deity (*iṣṭadebatā*) and offered the goddess her fervent devotion. This is how Basa from Janbazar explains her worship of and devotion for Santoṣī Mā:[356]

> I do *pūjā* for Santoṣī Mā and fast for her on Fridays. I give her gram (flour), sweets – especially sugarcane – water of the Ganges, incense, fruit, and ghee. I burn ghee and camphor for every *ārati*.[357] I do it on Fridays and Mondays. I always do the Santoṣī Mā worship first. I like her. She does things for us. I do not ask for anything. I do it because I like her. I love her. I always call you (addressing the goddess), I always tell you, I need you. We are friends.

The worship of Santoṣī Mā emerged when the Indian film industry launched a movie called *Jai Santoshi Ma* (loosely translated *Hail to the mother of satisfaction*) in 1975.[358] Most people who went to see the film knew nothing about the goddess. However, the movie introduced a goddess that was familiar in many ways. Santoṣī Mā was given characteristic moods, features, and attributes similar to 'old goddesses'. In Hawley's view, the popularity of Santoṣī Mā is based on her character, which is a combination of attributes and features "standardized by poster-art industry that dominates the iconographic imaginations of most modern-day Hindus" (Hawley 1998, 4). A good example of this is the comment of my Harijan Basti interviewee Dua, who portrayed Santoṣī Mā as follows:

> Santoṣī Mā looks like Durgā. She has four hands. She holds a trident and rides on a tiger.

Dua found Santoṣī Mā familiar because the goddess had features similar to standardized portraits of the well-known goddess Durgā. It was easier for Dua to accept a new deity which was already partly known. But is familiarity alone a satisfactory explanation for a new goddess coming (almost) out of nowhere and suddenly attracting the masses? Hawley argues that Santoṣī Mā would not have succeeded "had she not been part of a larger and already well-integrated culture of Goddess" in India (Hawley 1998, 4).[359] The environment of my interviewees was unquestion-

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[356] Basa was interviewed at her home in Janbazar on 12 March 2004.

[357] *Ārti* includes lighting a lamp, burning of incense, and waving the light and censer in front of the effigy of a deity as an offering during the *pūjā*. It often marks the ending of a rite.

[358] Within a few months the worship of Santoṣī Mā, the new mother goddess, spread all over the Indian subcontinent. The origin of the deity is, however, obscure. A temple in Jodhpur in the state of Rajastan was dedicated to Santoṣī Mā even before the launch, but even there she had not been known for very long under that name or form. Before 1967, the temple now dedicated to her belonged to a goddess called Lāl Sāgar Kī Mātā. She differed from Santoṣī Mā in one important respect: she was a blood-thirsty deity requiring animal sacrifices whereas Santoṣī Mā is vegetarian (Hawley 1998, 3; Smith 2003, 127).

[359] Accoring to Kurtz, a scholar studying Santoṣī Mā and her devotees, the straightforward adoption of Santoṣī Mā was possible because of the nature of Indian goddess worship in general (Kurtz, 1992). In his view, there is really

ably Śākta oriented. The three research communities and most of the communities in the near vicinity equally worshipped and celebrated religious feasts of various goddesses, both terrifying mother goddesses and benign divine consorts.

Santoṣī Mā appealed to the public because she was recognizable and carried on the well-known tradition of goddess worship, but above all she was made known to people through the modern media with something new added to her character. She was a benign goddess, but without a spouse. Her character combined the attributes of the independent, terrifying mother goddess with the gentle benign consort. It was original, yet easy for the masses to accept.[360]

Even though women could not explain where and how they had been introduced to Santoṣī Mā, it is not difficult to imagine with the help of the details they revealed. The film was advertised with attractive, colourful posters portraying the goddess. It was impossible not to notice them. The same posters appeared the market, and from there on the walls of public buildings, shops, and finally at home altars. Two of my three research neighbourhoods were located close to commercial centres with movie theatres. Films based on mythical stories of gods and goddesses (*ṭhākurer boi*) were very popular. People also spent more and more time watching films on television. Some people in the surrounding community had seen the *Jai Santoshi Ma* movie and then shared their experience of it. New devotees founded small shrines of Santoṣī Mā and word of her reputation passed from mouth to mouth. Yet, to start worshipping a novel deity, one requires knowledge of the right conduct. That was introduced through the movie itself.

In an immigrant community where people had to accustom themselves to a new environment and influences, new ideas easily entered and merged with old traditions. Worship of Santoṣī Mā included both new and traditional ideas, which suited people in the process of settling. Santoṣī Mā was also accessible to low caste people because her worship was not that demanding. The goddess did not require expensive gifts or the service of professionals. Santoṣī Mā was satisfied with offerings of raw sugar or sugar cane and chick-peas (*gur cānā*), a typical snack food of the common people. Anyone could start observing her fast and offering her *pūjā*, which was sup-

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only one goddess in India, and the different manifestations of goddesses are simply forms of the one goddess. Thus, Santoṣī Mā can be easily absorbed into the cult of goddess. In accordance with Kurtz, Hawley points out that in the context of the film, Santoṣī Mā was "a unitive presence", "the Great Goddess", who did not only "incorporate and summarize a certain spectrum of preexisting female divinities, but she unified them as well" (Hawley 1998, 6). Kurz's (and Hawley's) view is challenged by McDaniel, who points out that village goddesses, for example, help people identify with a particular place, caste, family, and group. The village goddess, instead of merging with other goddesses, is often thought to compete with goddesses of other villages – even if the goddesses have the same name (McDaniel 2004, 295–296).

[360] The character of Santoṣī Mā, in fact, challenges the whole model of the Hindu goddess, according to which married consort goddesses are thought to be benign and single goddesses malevolent. Kurtz, according to his findings on Santoṣī Mā, argues that it is first and foremost the nurturing and motherly qualities of a goddess that cause her to be considered benign, and the absence of such qualities that causes her to be considered malevolent. Thus, being married or single is not necessarily the determining factor (Kurtz 1992, 24–25).

posed to be done on Fridays.[361] Dua, an elderly Harijan Basti interviewee, had learned to conduct Santoṣī Mā worship as follows:[362]

> On Fridays we take vegetarian food (*nirāmiṣa*) because we make Santoṣī Mā pūjā. It is said that if you abstain from sour food, meat, fish, and tamarind (*teñtul*) on Fridays, the goddess grants you your wish. No one should come to your house that day. My daughter-in-law is doing this *pūjā*.

Harijan Basti interviewee Bali also followed the rules of Santoṣī Mā worship, but by adding something to it:[363]

> For Santoṣī Mā pūjā I clean a small brass jug (*ghaṭi*). I have a bath and draw a rice-flour pattern (*ālpanā*). I also have her photograph. Then I offer her raw sugar and chick-peas (*gur cānā*) and receive her gift (*prasāda*), and that is it.

During the Santoṣī Mā rite, Bali had taken a brass jug to represent the goddess. A brass jug is a common manifestation of a variety of goddesses, but using it for the Santoṣī Mā worship is Bali's personal choice. Bali also drew patterns (*ālpanā*) with rice-flour. In the movie the drawing of *ālpanā* is the way a housewife devotee of Santoṣī Mā expresses her concern for the family. In adopting a new rite it was typical for my interviewees to partly obey the original rules of ritual but also to select or add things according to customs and preferences of their own. Sometimes worship was reduced to a minimum. Reha kept the Santoṣī Mā worship simple:[364]

> On Fridays I do Santoṣī Mā pūjā. After fasting I offer water and sweets to the deity, and end by lighting a lamp (*ārati*).

As part of the Santoṣī Mā worship devotees have established an annual *brata* or feast. My interviewees explained that to observe it properly the *brata* required fasting and giving of offerings for sixteen consecutive Fridays. If the devotee faithfully maintained the rules of conduct, 'the mother of satisfaction' was believed to reward the devotee by fulfilling her wishes. Basa from Janbazar said that she had observed the *brata* and her wish had been fulfilled.[365] As part of the *brata*, women are expected to offer food also to those women and children that do not belong to the family. Most of the interviewees worshipping Santoṣī Mā recommended obedience to the goddess for those who desired a child. Babi believed that she had got a son with the help of the goddess:[366]

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[361] Hawley 1998, 3–6.

[362] Dua was interviewed on 29 January 2004.

[363] Bali was interviewed on 9 February 2004, at her home in Harijan Basti.

[364] Reha was interviewed on 18 March 2004, at her home in Harijan Basti.

[365] Basa was interviewed on 12 March 2004, at her home in Janbazar.

[366] Babi was interviewed on 11 December 2003, at the community centre of Janbazar.

> I used to have one more son, but he died, and I had only one daughter left. Then one mother made Santoṣī Mā pūjā for me, and I got a son. Because of this, I am fasting for Santoṣī Mā.

Religious feasts mark an auspicious time to communicate the wish of offspring to deities

In the course of the fieldwork it occurred to me that the religious celebration was generally understood as an appropriate and auspicious time to approach deities and ask them to fulfil whatever was desired. The auspicious timing of the feast, the preparations, and the ritual procedure were meant to please the celebrated deity so that the god would be more attentive to the gifts that people offered, and consequently, more likely to grant their wishes. Since there was necessarily no fixed reason for celebrating a feast, women planned religious feasts to serve their own purposes. For example, a *pūjā* that was generally made for the sake of children could become a chance for a woman to express her wish to have a son, to protect her child from evil, or to assure her child success at school, and so on. One example of such a feast is Jiutiyā brata (also called Jīvitputrika brata), which was performed by most Janbazari women and some women of Harijan Basti. This is how women explained the motivation underlying the performance of Jiutiyā:[367]

> Those who wish to have a baby they do Jiutiyā. I have also done it. (Babi)
>
> Jiutiyā is for the well-being of a male child. (Praba)
>
> After serious difficulties during pregnancy I started to perform Jiutiyā. (Praba)
>
> We pray to Mother Jiutiyā and seek her blessings and tearful eyes to avoid any danger to the children. (Savi)
>
> If a child is dying one can do Jiutiyā pūjā and the child will be fine. If you do this seriously the child will be fine. (Reha)

The above comments confirm that the Jiutiyā brata was conducted for the sake of children, but at the same time each woman celebrating the rite interpreted it to serve her personal purpose and demand. For some women, Jiutiyā brata was taken as a fertility rite, others believed in the protective capacity of the rite, and some even in the magical healing power of the *brata.* The same variation as regards the motivation underlying the ritual conduct was perceived in other rituals as well. Some *pūjā* feasts served very diverse purposes. Paki from Harijan Basti gives an enlightening example of that:[368]

[367] On Babi, see the above quote. Praba was interviewed on 11 February and 5 March 2004, and Savi on 20 March 2004, both of them in Janbazar. Reha was interviewed on 18 March 2004 in Harijan Basti.

[368] Paki was interviewed on 9 February 2004, at her home in Harijan Basti.

> Everyone goes (to Śiva temple) to join (the celebration of) the night of Śiba (Śivarātri). Young women do it to get a good husband. Even young boys do it when they know that their marriage is coming up. Some do it for children. Those who have been unable to conceive burn incense and stay there (at temple) all night. They do it to get a child.

Śivarātri (or Mahā Śivarātri) is commonly known as a feast of exchanging gifts with Śiva and his devotees. During the Śivarātri, god Śiva is celebrated with offerings and penances to persuade the deity to grant the devotees their wishes. For most of my interviewees, the feast was particularly a time for unmarried girls to pray for a good husband, but, as is obvious from Paki's quote, Śivarātri stood for other purposes as well. Śiva as a popular fertility god in Bengal was also approached during the Śivarātri to facilitate conception.[369]

Other *bratas* and feasts similar to Jiutiyā also concerned children or the well-being of the family, and were considered proper times for women to pray to deities to fulfil their desire for offspring. This is what two of my interviewees suggested:[370]

> If a woman does not have a child she can make a vow during Chhaṭḥa pūjā. (Unni)

> Those who wish to have a child can do Ṣaṣṭhī pūjā, or one can make Itu pūjā.[371] It is for the well-being of the family, but many do it if they wish to have children. It is up to you which *pūjā* you want to make to become pregnant. (Pal)

In the above quote Pal reveals what most of my interviewees generally agreed with. Almost any *brata, pūjā,* or other feast could be a fertility rite and an opportunity to influence a deity to grant the devotee with child.

### 5.1.2 Difficulties in becoming pregnant

#### Fear of infertility

For some of the interviewees, marriage did not mark the beginning of proper married life. If a girl was married before puberty, she usually did not settle in her husband's house immediately. For example, Praba from Janbazar was married five years before she actually moved into her husband's home at the age of sixteen. According to my Janbazari interviewees, the occasion of

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[369] On Śiva and fertility, see, for example, Maity 1989, 36–60.

[370] Unni was interviewed in Janbazar on 6 January 2004, and Pal in Ganti on 8 January 2004.

[371] The Itu rite is a good example of rituals performed for diverse reasons. According to Basak, Itu brata is usually performed for the following purposes: to find a good husband, to have children, and to attain wealth (Basak 2006, 110). The chant of Itu claims that in observing the rite one gets rid of the stigma of barrenness. Itu brata is not merely a human fertility rite; the god Itu is also thought to be the provider of crops. Some of my Ganti interviewees mentioned performing Itu pūjā on every Sunday of the Agrahāyaṇa month, but it is also commonly performed in the month of Kārtika. The Itu ritual involved bathing by the terrace of a pond (*ghāṭa*), fasting, leaving five different cereals by the pond, and narrating the story (*bratakathā*) of the sun-god Itu (Sen 1995, 70).

the in-laws accepting the mature bride into their house was marked by a celebration (Gaunā) distinct from the marriage feast. Women talked about Gaunā as the second marriage.[372] It was told that the celebration of Gaunā usually started with a procession from the bride's house to the house of her husband. The feast practically acted out the separation of a bride from her parents and transition to a new phase of life. The young wife was customarily received at her in-laws' house by her sister-in-law, who greeted her and said, please, come and take your bed in your in-laws' house.[373] This occasion was also thought to mark the beginning of the in-laws' eager anticipation of an offspring.

If the new bride was very young and had attained puberty only recently, some families allowed her to gradually learn how to carry out household tasks and religious duties, and a rapid pregnancy was less emphasized. However, if the years passed without a young wife becoming pregnant anxiety among the in-laws grew. Some interviewees who had not become pregnant shortly after their marriage had experienced pressure from their in-laws. The discontent was usually shown by verbal scolding and rebuking of the young wife, which obviously caused her anxiety over the fear of being infertile.[374]

Other women often advised those whose pregnancy was delayed. Most commonly these women were instructed to approach the divinities and to pray to them for a child. Raji from Harijan Basti guided childless women to pray as follows:[375]

> If the baby does not come even though it is desired they have to appeal to god: *Bābā*, please give me a child (*santāna*) so that I will not lose face.[376] If I do not get an offspring, people will show disgust for me (*ghennā karā*).

Ganti interviewee Juri instructed these women in the same vain:[377]

> Those women who do not get a baby and who wish to get one can pray to god: *Mā*, look at me.[378] This misfortune fell on me. I did not get a child.

These words of advice express eloquently the shame and grief the infertile women are thought to confront. Being without offspring is like being incomplete, losing face. Barrenness is seen as an unbearable misfortune, a stigma that people despise. And it is not only the barrenness that is des-

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[372] Jeffery et al. discuss Gaunā as the first cohabitation of the bride at her in-laws (Jeffery 1989, 28).

[373] Fieldwork diary, 11 January 2008.

[374] Jeffery & al. witnessed a similar situation among their research communities. According to them, "women who conceive quickly are considered fortunate. Even a couple of barren years after marriage results in gossip and searching for remedies, often at considerable cost to the husband and his parents" (Jeffery 1989, 87).

[375] Raji was interviewed in Harijan Basti on 5 February 2004.

[376] *Bābā* (Father) refers to a male divinity Raji is praying.

[377] Juri was interviewed in Ganti on 11 March 2004.

[378] *Mā* (Mother) refers to a female deity Juri is addressing in the prayer.

pised but the infertile woman herself. Raji's quote displays the fearful expectation of the hatred of others if she does not have a child.

Even though my interviewees maintained that remaining faithful and loyal to a particular deity is advantageous when praying for a child, in practice, most women who had difficulties in becoming pregnant went from one deity to another to ask for progeny. Regarding which deity to approach they consulted elders and religious specialists but counted also on the testimonies of various people they met in everyday encounters. Raji tells of her daughter-in-law's desperate efforts to become pregnant through divine assistance:

> If the baby is not coming, one has to call god. That is what my daughter-in-law Riki has been doing, but after five years she has not yet become pregnant. Riki did Chhaṭṭha pūjā, she did *pūjā* for Śītalā Mā and Kṛṣṇa-Bhagavaner pūjā, Gopāla pūjā, but the baby has not come.

According to Hélène Stork, infertility is often interpreted within the framework of the law of *karma*, and is thus seen as the trace of sins committed either in this life or in previous lives.[379] A variety of reasons might be given to explain why the sign of barrenness has been imprinted on a woman's body. It may be a consequence of failure to perform certain rites, or, even a small omission or error during the performance of ancestral rites. In the view of Herman Tull, the idea of *karma* was originally connected particularly with ritual practices in which good and bad referred to the valuation of action (*karma*), good being equated with the correct performance of the rite and bad with incorrect performance.[380]

Whatever the explanation given, infertility, among the communities participating in this study, was usually considered to be a failure of the woman.[381] She was the one who was not capable of conceiving or bearing a child. Most women, however, knew that the reasons for not having a baby can be male infertility as well. Harijan Basti interviewee Boti had had a sterilization operation after her second child, but had lost both of her children later on. She was now desperately hoping for one more child, but was not optimistic about it. Boti did not think that sterilization would stop her becoming pregnant, rather, she was certain that her misfortune followed from the love marriage which she had entered against her parents' will. This is how Boti reasoned her adversities:[382]

> I am calling god all the time: *Mā*, please give me a child. But I arranged my marriage on my own. No, in this life I will not get one (child).

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[379] Stork 1992, 91. According to the common interpretation of the doctrine of *karma*, every action has a consequence which will come to fruition in either this or a future life. Thus morally good acts will have positive consequences, whereas bad acts will produce negative results. An individual's present situation is thereby explained by reference to actions in her past history, in her present, or in previous lifetimes (Bowker 1997, 535).

[380] Tull 1989, 2.

[381] This perception is in line with Jeffery et al., who drew the same conclusion when doing field research among people of rural Bijnor (Jeffery & al. 1989, 87).

[382] Boti was interviewed at her home in Harijan Basti on 5 February 2004.

Boti justified her bad luck and misfortune by accusing herself. Her only explanation for infertility was her love marriage, which she considered sinful enough to cause her misery. It might be questioned if this was truly what she believed, or if she was just repeating the charges of her relatives.

During the fieldwork it became obvious that people considered infertility a tremendous misfortune for a woman. An infertile woman was not able to fulfil a woman's duty (*strīdharma*), and was likely to be abandoned by her husband and his family, sent back to her parents, even tortured, and replaced by a new wife.[383] According to Jeffery & al., it was often the family and close kin rather than the husband who insisted on rejecting an unproductive daughter-in-law.[384] The presence of a barren woman is commonly believed to be inauspicious and potentially harmful because her envious glances may cause ill effects on others.[385]

The fear and consequences of infertility are so dire that women usually try all means available to avoid such a fate. In the course of the interviews it became clear that one consolation for these women was to recall success stories of couples struggling to have a child. Such stories usually began with a description of the difficulties the infertile woman had faced and continued with elaborations on the treatments the woman had tried and descriptions of the deities or specialists they had consulted. The stories usually ended by glorifying the deity, treatment, or healer whose assistance had brought the longed-for reward. These stories helped the women evaluate the power and capacity of different deities, sacred places, and treatments, as well as the faith (*biśvāsa*) and dedication of the devotee.

### The question of belief: trust in the doctor or deity

The general populace in the Kolkata city area has become increasingly acquainted with modern medicine and treatments available at public and private hospitals and clinics. Expensive fertility treatments at private health centres, however, are far beyond most people's reach. In Janbazar and Harijan Basti women were somewhat informed about the municipal health services available to them, and some interviewees were aware of the assistance medical doctors could give them in fertility problems. The situation was altogether different in Ganti, which is located on the outskirts of Kolkata. Some Ganti women had never visited a clinical doctor or hospital, and were suspicious and critical of modern medicine. Several women in the three neighbourhoods had access solely to the treatments of local practitioners, traditional healers, and religious specialists, whose advice they diligently sought and utilized. This was also due to their conception of illness,

[383] In the neighbourhoods where I carried out my fieldwork people did not disclose cases of torturing unproductive women.

[384] Jeffery & al. 1989, 88.

[385] See, for example, Kolenda 1982, 241; Maity 1989, 23–24.

which many of my interviewees believed was not a result of natural causes, but the effect of evil influence and spirits.

Most of the women still believed that having a child depended on the favour of the god or god's will. Not a single interviewee trusted medical aid alone but also appealed to supernatural powers. Some said that becoming pregnant was a question of personal faith. Pho from Harijan Basti gives an enlightening account of her relation to medicine and religious faith:[386]

> If a lady has difficulty in getting a child, she has to go to a doctor, and the doctor will tell what to do. But we also believe in god (*ṭhākura*). We can ask god, please, give me a child. We often give a vow (*mānasika*) at that time. Some people take medicine, some may go to a mosque for charms and exorcism (*jhāṛa-phuṅka*). These are the things they do. Which one helps, that is up to their faith. One may show respect and obeisance (*praṇāma*) to god or give a fruit to god, but the doctor's medicine is also good.

According to Pho, consulting a doctor and appealing to a divinity are considered to be complementary. In her view, most people do both, but in theory, a person could select either one of the methods to become pregnant. Pho herself was confident that she would not rely on the doctor alone. According to Pho, however, a deity imposed certain conditions: a woman had to devout herself to the deity, believe in the capacity of the deity, and believe that the coming of the child was the will of the deity. In the one hand, Pho recognized the importance of devotion and the potential of a devotee to influence the actions of deities, but on the other hand, she left it to god to decide: "After all, everything is up to the will of god and to one's faith". More than any other women interviewed for my study Pho emphasized the aspect of personal faith and argued:[387]

> Why do we do *pūjās*? Have we ever seen god (*ṭhākura*)? It is because we believe (*biśvāsa*). To believe is a great thing. I have never seen god, but I give *pūjā* and believe.

In the same vein, Sada from Ganti was confident that a woman has to worship the deity by faith if she is to achieve her goal:[388]

> Some people go to the god Lokenāth and give him *mānata* to get a child. You have to go with faith and then it will happen. One lady did not go to the hospital, but she went to the house of god (*ṭhākura-bāṛi*) and she got a child.

Praba from Janbazar goes even further, claiming that one cannot do anything to influence the absolute will of god:[389]

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[386] Pho was interviewed at her home in Harijan Basti on 4 March 2004.

[387] Pho had a relative that had converted to Christianity. She spoke of him with much respect. It is possible that her thoughts were influenced by Christian conceptions of faith which she had learned from the relative.

[388] Sada was interviewed in Ganti on 1 March 2004.

[389] Praba was interviewed at her home in Janbazar on 11 February and 5 March 2004.

> Some perform the *pūjā* of Santoshī Mā because of the wish for a child. But it is up to God's (Bhagavān) wish, no matter how much one may try. If god wishes, then you are granted all your wishes. But if god does not want to bless you – however hard you may try, the wishes remain unfulfilled.

The way Praba is arguing here is a good example of certain kind of god-talk. When she mentions god or the will of god she does not necessarily refer to any god by specific name or identity. Instead, she refers to the idea of God (Bhagavān) in general. My interviewees would have not said "it is up to Mā Kālī what will happen", yet they often said "it is up to Bhagavān". A similar idea of God was also introduced by Banu, who replied to my question of what a woman can do if she wishes to have a child as follows: "One has to call Bhagavān. Everything is up to Bhagavān. It is not in our hands, not at all".[390]

The above views are noteworthy considering all the religious activities women continuously pursued to fulfilf their wishes. While most women attempted to influence the divinities by gift-giving and dutifully abiding by the rules of ritual conduct, many also believed that everything was up to the will of god. The will of god argument was used to explain and justify the fact that women's wishes were not always fulfilled even though they offered expensive gifts to the deities.

### Baths, amulets, and treatments

As mentioned, the awareness of modern medicine did not stop my interviewees from seeking help for their problems from the varied methods of alternative medicine and healing. During the fieldwork the women introduced to me a range of practices that they believed were effective in treating infertility. For example, Swara from Ganti recommended that women who wished to become pregnant should take a bath, wear an amulet (*māduli*), and take natural remedies.[391]

Several of my informants mentioned that such women should take a purifying bath, followed by the invocation of a deity, giving of *pūjā*, or making of *mānasika*. Bathing, or taking a dip in a river or pond, was an elementary part of the rituals women performed. The bath was thought to purify the devotee's body, and thus preceded the giving of *pūjā* almost without exception. The daily house *pūjās* were performed only after the morning bath. Similarly, when the women prepared for any community *pūjā*, the actual celebration usually began by bathing, or bathing was included in the series of activities carried out when conducting the rituals. A bath also preceded the breaking of a fast.

[390] Banu was interviewed in Harijan Basti on 10 March 2004.

[391] Swara was interviewed in Ganti on 16 February 2004.

Bathing as a preparation for a ritual was thought to be more than simply washing the dirt off of the physical body. It meant preparing oneself to be worthy and well-qualified to perform a rite. Performing rites unclean was thought to harm rather than benefit the performer. Many believed that a woman who failed to become pregnant suffered her condition because of her failure to maintain ritual purity. They believed that since she could not conceive she must be somehow unclean and thus unfavourable to the deity. The unfertile woman was thus advised that by bathing she could make amends for her failure and become competent to offer gifts to the deity.[392]

Interviewees felt that the water source and the place of bathing also contributed to its effectivity.[393] For example, if someone brought in a bucketful of tap water or well water and washed herself in it, the bath was not necessarily thought to have a sufficiently purifying effect if she needed to be worthy to give an offering to the deity. For a daily house *pūjā,* tap water or well water was considered adequate, but for more important religious feasts and rituals, bathing was supposed to take place either by a pond or river. Most ponds and rivers in India have landing terraces (*ghāṭa*) where ritual bathing is conducted. The bathing practices of my interviewees varied according to the location of the neighbourhood. As Ganti was located by the banks of a channel, women took their baths right there. When women of Harijan Basti celebrated a community feast or other more important rituals they went to a nearby pond for bathing; otherwise they bathed in tap water at home. In Janbazar, the tap water was the only water source in the immediate proximity of the neighbourhood. For special occasions, such as during the Chhaṭṭha pūjā, funeral rites, or when visiting the Dakshineswar Kālī temple, Janbazari women took a bath by the Hoogley river, which they considered as a distributary of the river Ganges.[394]

According to a common belief of Hindus, the various water sources reflect the sanctity of the holiest stream, Mother Ganges. If bathing in the Ganges is not possible, bathing in other water sources can act as a substitute.[395] Like bathing in the Ganges (*gaṅgā kare*) was a saying used by some of my interviewees when they referred to bathing carried out properly and carefully before performing a ritual. Bathing in the Ganges and like bathing in the Ganges were understood to be merits that were also valuable for women hoping for a child.[396] In Ganti and in

[392] Water as a purifying element plays a very important role in Hindu ritual traditions. Water as a purifier was already discussed in the Vedic scriptures (Kane 1968–1977, Vol.4., 321).

[393] According to common Hindu thought, the water sources have a certain ranking as regards their purifying capacity. Tap water and well water are at the bottom and thus thought to have less purifying volume. After that, in rising order, are pond water, spring water, and river water. The top category comprises waters in which holy men have bathed and the river considered as the most sacred of all, Mother Ganges (Kane 1968–77, Vol.4., 660–661).

[394] There is tendency among Hindus living not too far from the actual Ganges to consider the river covering a much wider area than it actually does.

[395] Eck 1983, 212–215; Eck 1998, 138.

[396] Maity mentions the folk practice of worshipping the river Ganges by childless women. According to the folk belief that Maity quotes, the Ganges is thought to have "special powers that transform the barrenness into fecundity": A woman is directed to request the Ganges "either to bestow upon her a son or to give her a watery deathbed as a place of eternal sleep which is preferable to the dishonoured life of a barren women" (Maity 1989, 31).

Harijan Basti respect was paid to the sanctity of the water source by immersing an effigy of the celebrated deity in the pond, channel, or river at the closing of a feast.

Whereas bathing in sacred water was commonly believed to have an auspicious influence, the belief in the advantages of wearing an amulet (usually called *māduli*) split the women into two groups.[397] Some women were confident that an amulet given by a priest (*purohita*), guru, or other religious specialist had a beneficial influence on their lives, while others did not believe in the power of amulets. Pura from Ganti had personally experienced the advantageous effects of an amulet and witnessed: "I have an amulet. Since I have been wearing it, I have felt better".[398]

Some women were disappointed in the amulet, because they did not experience any change in their condition. Ganti interviewee Bu complained:[399]

> I wore both an amulet and a ring when I had aches and pains. They told me that the ache would diminish. But it did not help, so I took off the amulet and threw it away.

The most common amulets in the research communities were threads, cylinders and rings. Cylinders were tiny cases in which people placed various magical objects such as pieces of animal bones and medicine. The rings became magical objects when they had special stones recommended by an astrologer. Some interviewees recommended the wearing of an amulet for those women who had problems with becoming pregnant. Sada from Ganti noted: "Many people go and get an amulet (*māduli*) if they do not get a child".[400] Some women in my research neighbourhoods wore an amulet to improve fertility but the amulet was mainly worn to protect one from illnesses, evil influences, and misfortunes, and to cure diseases.[401] I will discuss the protective aspect of the amulet later in more detail.

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[397] The classical work of Moberly lists the names of amulets in Bengal and the surrounding regions. Those are known as *tawīz, māduli, kavac, jap, paici, baisut* (Bengal), *jantra* (Bihar) and *demuria* or *daunria* (Orissa). Each of these names, according to Moberly, have a special connotation, but they can also be grouped under the general concept, amulet (Moberly 1906, 224). My interviewees preferred using the term *māduli.*

[398] Pura was interviewed at her home in Ganti on 2 February 2004.

[399] Bu was interviewed at her home in Ganti on 1 March 2004.

[400] Sada was interviewed at her home in Ganti on 1 March 2004.

[401] Moberly lists the main reasons for wearing an amulet in 1906 as follows: "To ward off or cure diseases, and to protect the wearer from the power of the evil eye, from the effects of witchcraft, from the attacks of evil spirits, and from the influence of malignant planets. Others are worn for general good luck, for freedom from bodily danger, and for protection against hydrophobia, snakebite, robbers, and fires. Others again are worn for special objectives, –to inspire love, to regain the affections of an inattentive husband, for reunion with absent friend, to prevail against enemies, to win at dice, to pass examination, to get employment, to gain the favour of masters and superiors, and to bring others under subjection, to obtain children, for timely and safe delivery, or for success in law suits or in any difficult task" (Moberly 1906, 224). More than a hundred years afterwards I must note that not much has changed.

Ganti interviewee Swara was a widow of a village herbal doctor (*kabirāja*).[402] She described some treatments her husband used to give for infertility. He had prepared the medicine himself out of natural items such as roots, plants, and herbs. Swara explained that the medicine was to be given in accordance with the lunar calendar, on the auspicious days and after a cleansing bath. According to Swara, the schedule of the treatment for infertile women went as follows:[403]

> At the time of the full moon (*pūrṇimā*) and new moon (*amābasyā*) those women who did not get a baby have to take a bath during the afternoon. And then *kabirāja* or someone like *kabirāja* gives them medicine made of natural things like roots of trees. This medicine helps them to get a child.

As has been shown, there was an abundance of methods and practices for treating infertility. Women sought assistance and consolation from deities, doctors, as well as from various beliefs and treatments.

### 5.1.3. In hope of a son

#### Favouring the male child

According to the Census of India 2011, the average sex ratio in the subcontinent of India is 933, which means that there are sixty-seven females fewer per every thousand males.[404] In West Bengal in 2011 the sex ratio was 934 and in the area of Kolkata city the number of females is approximately 240 000 fewer than males.[405] There are no simple explanations for this smaller number of females. However, if one looks at the whole life cycle of Indian women and the way women are treated and valued at the different stages of their lives, it becomes somewhat comprehensible. The discrimination of woman in India already begins before the girl child is born. A recent expert poll conducted by TrustLaw of Thomson Reuters Foundation Service listed India as the fourth most dangerous country for a woman to live in. The ranking was issued primarily

[402] *Kabirājas* in general follow the Ayurvedic system of treatments. According to Karim, a *kabirāja* usually belongs to a low caste Hindu community (Karim 1988, 282). Their treatments are based on a special view of human physiology according to which the human being is a conglomeration of three humours; wind, bile and mucus. If there is proper balance of the three in the body, mind and spirit, there will not be any disease or disorder. Disease is understood simply as a result of disharmony in the body and mind. *Kabirājas* usually emphasize the correct diet, cleanliness, breathing; they use herbs, minerals and animal substances as medicine.

[403] Swara was interviewed in Ganti on 16 February 2004.

[404] Census of India 2011.

[405] Census of India 2011: Provisional Population Totals: West Bengal. The number of people left outside the official census statistics is difficult to estimate. As Kolkata is a city with a constant flow of immigrants, seasonal migration, massive illegal housing and a nomadic way of life, the numbers given in the census hardly do justice to the real situation.

because of the frequency of female foeticide and infanticide, child marriage, and high levels of trafficking.[406]

Discussing the preference of the male child over the female was usually a somewhat ambiguous issue for the interviewed women. When the subject matter was brought up, the common reactions were in line with Banu or Parbo:[407]

> Daughter or son, it does not make a difference. (Banu)
>
> Everyone wishes for a son. (Parbo)

[406] TrustLaw: Thomson Reuters Foundation Service. The news concerning the results of the poll was published on 15 June 2011. TrustLaw asked 213 gender experts from five continents to rank countries by overall perceptions of danger as well as by six risks: health threats, sexual violence, non-sexual violence, cultural and religious factors, lack of access to resources, and trafficking (TrustLaw: Factsheet – The World's Most Dangerous Countries for Women).

[407] Banu was interviewed in Harijan Basti on 10 March 2004, and Parbo in Ganti on 8 January 2004.

Figure 16: “Everyone wishes for a son”, admits Parbo.

Only one interviewee of thirty-two admitted that she wished for a girl child when she became pregnant for the first time. After her daughter was born, however, she started praying for a son. All the women who reacted by claiming that the sex of the child did not matter had at least one son, whereas women with only daughters without exception complained about their situation:[408]

> Since childhood I have been praying. I wanted to have a son, but I did not get one. (Pura, a mother of two daughters)

> When I got my second daughter, I was thinking it would be good to get a son, but god gave me one more daughter. What to do? I have no luck. (Parbo, a mother of three daughters)

Favouring a male child especially in the low caste society is not unreasonable. Having a son is not only a matter of continuing the family line but also social security – someone who supports the aging parents. Pho from Harijan Basti shared her thoughts as follows:[409]

> Within our community, seventy-five percent of the people want to have a male child and twenty-five percent wish for a girl. Boys can work and take care of their parents whereas girls are given away in marriage. To marry a daughter off costs a lot. We have to pay a lot of dowry.

Despite the 1961 Dowry Prohibition Act, dowry demands are still in practice, and have even gained strength in modern Indian society.[410] The size of the dowry, on the one hand, is thought to correlate with the status and esteem of the family. Paying a generous dowry is a way to show off and to raise the position of the family. On the other hand, a dowry is paid to bring some security for the daughter. People believe that if the in-laws are satisfied with the dowry they will treat the new daughter-in-law well.

When my Janbazar interviewee Unni was pregnant for the third time everyone was certain that after two sons she would give birth to a daughter. Neither Unni herself nor her husband and their sons wanted a baby girl in the family. This is how Unni justified her wish for a son:[411]

> I did not want a daughter, because the environment is not good for bringing up a child. When I had had two sons I became pregnant once again. People said that it would be a girl. When I had labour pains my husband said to give him the dishes so that he would wash them. While washing, he said: "I do not wish to have a girl child. She would ask for golden earrings and nose rings and we cannot afford it". My husband and one of our elder sons accompanied me to hospital, and by three o'clock my son was born. The son

[408] Pura was interviewed at her home in Ganti on 2 February 2004. On Parbo, see the above footnote.

[409] Pho was interviewed at her home in Harijan Basti on 4 March 2004.

[410] See, for example, Jacobson 1995, 46; Vatuk 2006, 206.

[411] Unni was interviewed at her home in Janbazar on 6 January 2004.

> (less than five-years-old) who accompanied my husband to the hospital was crying. The sister on duty enquired why he was crying. I said it is not for any thing in particular. The child asked me to show the male organs of the newborn. When he was sure the newborn was a brother he began to kiss and caress him. Everybody thought the newborn would be a girl child. Even my husband thought it was going to be a girl and he was very dejected. After the third son I had an operation because the family was growing in size and it would have become too difficult to maintain it.

Is the view of Unni and her family exceptional or does it convey the overall sentiment towards girls? The majority of my interviewees preferred the male sex over the female but no one was as drastically against having a daughter as Unni was. Why did she have such a negative attitude towards having a daughter? One explanation lies in the first line of the above quote. Unni did not want a daughter because of the environment of the neighbourhood. Janbazar, being a congested quarter even according to Kolkata standards, had a large male majority and very limited facilities for women. In Unni's family the freedom of women and girls to move around was limited to a minimum. It is likely that Unni thought that her daughter would have been caged in a similar way as the other women of her community. Unni did not want such a future for her daughter. Unni's husband was more worried about the economic burden a daughter would cause. He did not mention the requirements of a dowry but was concerned about the costly jewellery that a daughter would have required.

The quote from Unni shows how the attitude of favouring males is transferred from generation to generation. She describes her elder son crying because he was unsure whether the baby was a boy or girl. The mother did not seem to even consider that he might have been crying because of feeling left out or being jealous of his parents; instead, Unni assumed that the son was worried about the sex of his newborn sibling. His reaction reflected the family's negative attitude towards a girl child.

### Practices pursuing the birth of a son

As early as in the Gṛhyasūtras, the ritual manuals of the householder, there is mention about a pre-natal rite of assuring the birth of a male child (Puṁsavāna saṃskāra). The rite is performed after conception is ascertained. The rite is meant to consecrate the child in the womb, to prevent the death of the foetus, and to set the scene for a baby boy. It is believed that the rite contributes to the birth of a male child if it is performed between the second and eighth months of pregnancy.[412]

Even though none of the women interviewed performed the Puṁsavāna saṃskāra, most of them knew the rites, customs, and practices that a woman hoping for a son should follow. The advice of most interviewees accorded with the general recommendations they would suggest

[412] McGee 2004, 340; Pandey 1994, 60–62.

for a woman hoping to become pregnant. The following advice of the Harijan Basti interviewees was in line with most women:[413]

> One has to do *brata*. I have told many ladies to do *brata* if they wish to get a son. In the month of Āśbina (from mid-September to mid-October) there is one fast. It is the *pūjā* of (goddess) Śītalā Mā. (Reha)
>
> If one does not have son, one makes *mānata* to get a son. (Raji)
>
> If one wants a male child, one can do Jiutiyā pūjā. (Sani)

The birth of a male child was also promoted by various local customs and practices. Harijan Basti interviewee Reha recounted a practice that her family had adhered to in her place of origin:

> In Orissa there is one *mānasika* related to Śītalā Mā. To get a son you have to eat with your left hand until the child is born. You also have to appeal to the Mother (here she refers to Śītalā Mā) three times for a son. You eat with your left hand and ask for a son from Mother. Then you go out and you should neither eat nor say anything. You repeat this three times. Then when you get your son and he has grown, you have to prepare a sweet dish (*moyā* with cumin) by your own hands.[414] You must keep a fast and go with your son to the Śītalā temple, make *pūjā*, and tell that *mānasika* is finished.

This description of the rules for promoting the birth of a male child includes some common elements of folk custom. It is an optional activity that includes a voluntary promise to a deity to do something that does not necessarily have a clear connection with the matter it is believed to contribute to. Here, the connection is altogether ambiguous; eating with the left hand during pregnancy is believed to reward one with a male child. The other convention is to repeatedly invoke the deity for a son, which in most cases refers to carrying out a *pūjā* with offerings. Eating with the left hand and repeating the invocation are meant to please and show to the deity the determination of the pregnant woman hoping for a son.

The exchange of gifts between the devotee and deity is clearly seen: The devotee has promised to abide by a course of action – to put up with the inconvenience of eating with the left hand – which is against the rules of proper behaviour. Namely, the left hand is thought to be dirty because it is used for cleaning after relieving oneself. In return for obeying this disgraceful practice the deity is expected to grant the pregnant woman a son. The exchange continues with the devotee fulfilling her promise (finishing the *mānasika*). Her offering of favourable gifts marks her fidelity towards the deity.

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[413] Reha was interviewed on 18 March 2004, Raji on 5 February 2004, and Sani on 10 March 2004. All of them in Harijan Basti.

[414] *Moyā* is 'a sweet dish', usually a sweetened ball of parched or fried rice.

When Ganti interviewee Pal became pregnant after having a daughter, she was hoping for a son. She had been advised to seek assistance from the goddess Mā Manasā, which, according to Pal, turned out to be the right thing for her to do:[415]

> When one is pregnant, it is usual to give *mānata*. When I was pregnant with my son, I gave *mānata* at the place (*thāna*) of Manasā. They said that if you do not yet have a son, you have to give a gift (*dāna*) on three (consecutive) days.[416] I gave a lot of food to my guru-sister (*gurubona*).[417] Seven years after the birth of my daughter I gave birth to a son. After that I sang Manasā songs for three nights.

The rhetoric of gift exchange is again clearly to be discernible. A male child was expected in return for the *mānasika,* the gift of *dāna*, the food given to the fellow disciple. Even though the male child was born only after seven years, Pal believed that the child was born with the help of the goddess Manasā and in exchange for her gifts to the goddess.

In the last sentence of the above quote, Pal tells of singing Manasā songs for three nights after the birth of her son. This can be understood as an expression of both joy and gratefulness but also as a gesture of finalizing the promise of *mānasika.* The singing of Manasā songs usually takes place during the annual feast of Manasā pūjā. In Ganti the feast was celebrated by singing for three nights in a row and by enjoying the drama of Manasā performed by local artists.[418]

Giving birth to a son in India usually results in a rise in status for a woman in the hierarchy of the family. The mother of a male child is thought to have proved to be 'fertile soil' nurturing the male seed and bearing the hoped-for fruit, whereas the mother of mere daughters is judged to have failed to fulfil her duty (*strīdharma*). Those interviewees whose first-born children were daughters explained that after two or three daughters are born the atmosphere within a family often becomes tense. The family realizes that having more children will become difficult for the family to sustain but after the birth of daughters the demand for having a son is even more urgent. Harijan Basti interviewee Raji was frustrated after having given birth to five daughters in a row. In her desperation she sought assistance from a deity that had been promoted by a popular film. She related the following course of events that reversed her misery of being the mother of mere daughters:[419]

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[415] Pal was interviewed at her home in Ganti on 8 January 2004.

[416] *Dāna* is discussed in detail in Chapter 2. In general, *dāna* is 'a gift', 'donation', 'present', or 'alms' given to persons of equal or higher status; for example to a Brahman priest. My interviewees refer to it also as a gift given to a deity.

[417] Guru-sister (*gurubona*) refers to a female follower of the same guru. The followers of the same guru are considered to be guru-sisters and guru-brothers (*gurubhāi).* Pal was initiated by Sai Josai and Gurumā.

[418] Fieldwork diary, 22 September 2003.

[419] Raji was interviewed in Harijan Basti on 5 February 2004.

> I went to Tarakeswar, the temple of god Śib.[420] I had *mānasika* for a son. I really was praying for a son. I did not have one. I had five daughters. My mother-in-law and father-in-law kept telling me that my baby will be a girl, it will be a girl. At that time I saw everyone going to Tarakeswar. I cried and told (my family) that I will go. My grandmother asked why I am going. I told her that Father (*Bābā*) is calling me, I will go.[421] When I went there I saw people singing and doing *ḍhila-bandha.*[422] One elderly woman was sitting there and I asked her why they were singing and doing *ḍhila-bandha*. She told me that those who do not have a child come to give *mānata* by singing and doing the *ḍhila-bandha*. So I also did the same. I invoked God, please, give me one son, everyone is telling I can not get a son. […] And I got a son, five of them. From then on, I became a holy woman (*sannyāsinī*).[423] I am really eager to pray. I go (to Tarakeswar) by foot and bring some water with me.

Giving birth to five daughters in a row is believed to be a tremendous misfortune for a family in India. The misery of Raji was apparent. Her in-laws discouraged her by predicting that her would-be child was certainly a daughter. She was desperate and tried to find a way out of the situation. The above quote of Raji obviously falls into the category of success stories of those who, after experiencing hard times, have a child (son), and believe that it happened with the help of a certain deity and in return for the gifts offered to the deity.

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[420] Raji refers to a famous temple in Tarakeswar, where god Śiva is believed to manifest Himself in the form of Tāraknāth. Tarakeswar is located in the Hoogley District in West Bengal, fifty-five miles northwest of Kolkata. The water tank Dudhpukur on the north side of the temple is believed to fulfil prayers of pilgrims who take a dip in it. Pilgrims come there throughout the year, especially on Mondays and during the main Śiva festivals such as Śivarātri, Gājan, and Śrābaṇi (see Chakrabarti 1984). Maity lists Tarakeswar as one of those temples that are frequently visited by womenfolk in the hope of being blessed with progeny. Śiva and particularly his phallic symbol *liṅga* have been, from the time of the Indus valley period, associated with the fertility cult and rituals (Maity 1989, 37–39).

[421] *Bābā* here refers to Śiva or Bābā Tāraknāth.

[422] *Ḍhila* refers to 'a hard lump', especially of stone, brick, or clay, and *bandha* to any 'device for binding' or 'fastening': 'a tie', 'bond', or 'bondage' (Biswas 2000). According to Chakrabarti, *ḍhila-bandha* is one of the rituals women hoping for a son come to perform in Tarakeswar (Chakrabarti 1984, 69–70). As its name suggests, it involves an act of tying (*bandha*) a lump of hard clay, brick, or stone (*ḍhila*) with one's own hair or with a rope onto a tree or other object in front of the deity. The same activity is observed in other temples. As mentioned, it is customary for people to tie pieces of brick, clay, or other material to the sacred trees as a sign of giving a vow.

[423] The terms *sannyāsinī* (female) / *sannyāsī* (male) are usually associated with the doctrines and practices relating particularly to the god Śiva. There are manifold uses of the term. In the popular mind the term *sannyāsī* refers to any 'holy person' who has attained religious authority or is gifted with charisma. Against this background Raji also titled herself as a *sannyāsinī.* The term is often used of monks or of those who have renounced their former lives. The estimated number of *sannyāsīs* and *sannyāsinīs* of various orders in India is seven to fifteen million. Formally, a prerequisite for becoming a *sannyāsī* is acceptance by a guru from an acknowledged order. To officially become a *sannyāsī* on must formally and finally renounce all ties of family, caste, and property. According to Hindu law books, the life of a *sannyāsī* is the fourth and last stage in life of all twice-born Hindus, and usually recommended only for men. The *sannyāsī* lives outside the normal duties and dedicates his life solely to the goal of liberation (*mokṣa*). He wanders around subsisting on alms. The full ritual process before becoming a *sannyāsī* includes penance, purificatory oblations, ritual bath, fasting, giving of offerings, and so on. Cases of self-initiation occur outside the formal initiation rituals (Bowker 1997, 849; Klostermaier 1998, 163).

At the same time Raji was dealing with these problems, a film titled *Baba Taraknath* (1977) was released and turned out to be to a box-office success in the state of West Bengal. The age-old folk tale of a regional deity, Tāraknāth, was given expression in modern form and reached the hearts of the general populace. The effects of the film locally were similar what happened nationwide after the movie *Jai Santoshi Ma*. Within a short time the shrine town of Tarakeswar, dating from the eighteenth century grew to be the most popular Śaiva centre in the state. The flow of pilgrims coming by foot and bringing water from the Ganges (*jala-ḍhala*) multiplied.[424]

When Raji discovered that masses of people were going on pilgrimages to Tarakeswar she also became interested. She did not mention seeing the film but had supposedly heard some version of the folk tale of Bābā Tāraknāth. She had probably heard the story of Mahamaya, a childless woman, who went to Tarakeswar to undertake a ritual of *dharnā* to cure her infertility. According to the version of the story introduced in the film, Mahamaya hopes to achieve the miraculous intercession of the shrine deity Tāraknāth. Mahamaya along with other pilgrims lies prostrate on the temple floor before the shrine and maintains a fast until the deity appears to her in a dream and instructs her on what steps to take to overcome her difficulties. Mahamaya's fast is rewarded by a vision of Śiva, and her wish for a child is granted.[425]

Raji said that she began to observe the same ritual practices – particularly the *ḍhila-bandha* – as the other pilgrims in Tarakeswar, and prayed for a son. According to Chakrabarti, *ḍhila-bandha* suggests "a sort of contractual relation between the devout and the deity. […] The deity may or may not fulfil the vow but if it does, the devout must honour the unilateral contract and offer the worship".[426] The contract that Raji made with the deity involved the promise of loyalty and fidelity in exchange for her wishes being granted.

It so happened that Raji gave birth to five sons, turning her failure and misfortune into victory. She believed that the deity had shown her favour, listened to her prayers, and rewarded her plentifully. She had left behind the miserable status of mother of mere daughters and become a mother of five sons; in addition, she had attained a status of holy woman (*sannyāsinī*). It is unlikely that the authorities of the Tarakeswar temple honoured her with the formal status of *sannyāsinī*. More probably the title was given unofficially either by other pilgrims, her community, or Raji herself. Raji's demeanour indicated that she was proud and confident of her position. She was able to silence the accusations of her in-laws and prove that she was a woman worth respect.

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[424] Chakrabarti 1984, 96; Morinis 1982, 67, 69, and 71. *Jala-ḍhala*, the pouring of the holy water of the Ganges over the top of the image of Tāraknāth, is one of the most popular ritual acts performed by the Tarakeswar pilgrims (Chakrabarti 1984, 69).

[425] Morinis 1982, 69. The practice of lying down on the temple floor to pray for offspring is common practice in a number of Śiva temples throughout Bengal. On *dharnā* performed in Tarakeswar and other Śiva temples of Bengal, see for example, Chakrabarti 1984, 71–73; Maity 1989, 38.

[426] Chakrabarti 1984, 69–70. The relation between the devotee and deity is also referred to as a contract also by McGee (1991, 80–81).

She had seemingly taken a role of a superior giving advice to others, and as one of the Harijan Basti interviewees mentioned, she was profoundly respected for what she was. Raji was eager to narrate her experience and tell people how they should worship if they were to get results:

> I think that if I love Him (god Śiva), He will certainly love me. If my mind is close to Him and I make *pūjā*, what can happen to me? Nothing will happen. One has to invoke Him from the bottom of one's mind. One has to pray (*prārthanā karā*) to him (*ṭhākura*): God, why is this happening to me? If your mind is calling god, the god will listen. God is awake all the time. […] They do not do what I am doing. I do not eat the whole day and night, I keep a fast. Only in the morning when the *pūjā* is finished do I drink water. Then I have tea and a biscuit. Look at me, is god listening to me or not? God is listening to my words. God gave me five sons and five daughters, because I gave *pūjā* with my mind (*maner theke*). God heard me.

During the community rituals of Harijan Basti it became clear that Raji had a certain religious authority. She was in a special position, for instance, to perform the rites on others' behalf, or to be the first one to speak with a spirit-possessed person. Raji was always present when people celebrated any religious feast. This may be because of her status of holy woman (*sannyāsinī*), or because of her age. She was one of the oldest married women in the community.

Other interviewees commented that their encounter with a deity consoled them even if there was no concrete change in their life circumstances. Ganti interviewee Pura, a mother of two daughters, shared her story:[427]

> In the house of my in-laws they worship a goddess, Mā Kalmiki.[428] I went to my in-laws' house fifteen years ago during the Kalmiki pūjā. There was a place where people had gathered to worship the goddess. […] We made *pūjā* there. They gave a goat as a sacrifice (*bali*). She (Mā Kalmiki) did not like the goat. We gave some blood and plantain to the Brahman and he placed it at the feet of the goddess. *Bābā* came to the body of my husband's brother and Mother (Mā Kalmiki) came to the body of my sister-in-law.[429] My husband's brother went away and Mother did not like that. She started crying. I could not bear Mother crying. Mother did not like the sari (she was wearing) and enquired why there were no nice saris at the bazaar. Mother also cried because the goat was so little. […] There were a lot of relatives there and they also talked to Mother. They asked why I (Pura) did not have a son. All the others had two or three, but I did not have a son. They (relatives) said (to me) that there was one mountain in Orissa, and I had to go to this mountain and give *mānata*. She (Mother) said that I (Pura) had already given *mānata* and I did not need to do it anymore. A son had not come. I gave

[427] Pura was interviewed in Ganti on 2 February 2004.

[428] Kalmiki Mā is a mother goddess mainly worshipped in the state of Orissa.

[429] *Bābā* here refers to a male god whose name Pura does not reveal. *Mā* supposedly refers to Kalmiki Mā. In the rest of the quote Pura addresses Kalmiki Mā as Mother (*Mā*). Two of Pura's relatives were possessed (*bhara hoyā*) by a spirit or ghost of the deity, which is expected to happen at times during community *pūjās*.

> *pūjā* and spoke to Mother. She said that I had to believe what she told me. Then I did service (*sebā*) to Mother.[430] After that there was playing of music outside. Then what did she (Mother) do? Mother came to me joyfully and said I have two or three sons for you. Then Mother left. She took a bath and ate food. Mother really ate.

What does Pura mean by her story? First, the story seems to justify Pura's situation. She is without a son, but the goddess has a reserve of two or three sons for her. Second, this story convinces others that the deity looks with favour upon Pura even though she has not had a son. The fact that the goddess promises to keep two or three sons for her is thought to prove that Pura is worthy of the sons. She may imagine having two sons even though she will never give birth to them, or the sons are for her in the life to come. Pura highlights the fact that the goddess is defending her against those who are trying to advise her to make *mānasika* for a son.

In her story Pura describes the encounter with the goddess as if she were directly communicating with the deity. The sister-in-law, who is possessed by the spirit of the goddess and thus mediating the deity, does not seem to exist for her. Pura portrays the goddess as having human emotions. She cried because she was unhappy and she was dissatisfied with the gifts people offered to her. The relationship of the goddess and Pura was also described as emotional. Pura could not bear to see the goddess crying, and felt compassion for the goddess' grief. To show devotion to the deity Pura offered *pūjā* and did service for her. The deity, for her part, also displayed compassion for Pura. The goddess addressed her directly, defended her against the others, and consoled her with good news. This apparently gave Pura such personal consolation that she remembered the event fifteen years later.

The idea that somewhere in the world of deities there is a reserve of children was introduced by other interviewees as well. During discussions about the issue of infertility with some women of Janbazar, one of them stated that if a couple still did not get a child after trying for a long time, they would have to agree that in god's house there was no child for them.[431] This conclusion was a way of accepting the destiny one could not fight against.

[430] The term *sebā* has various references. It can mean 'serving', 'waiting upon', or 'nursing', but also 'worship', 'obeisance', or 'salutation' (Biswas 2000).

[431] Fieldwork diary, 11 January 2008.

## 5.2 Birth rites

### 5.2.1 Vulnerable period of nine months

#### Varied methods for safeguarding the pregnancy

All of the women interviewed agreed that when the newly married wife became pregnant for the first time it was joyous news for the family: They would get an offspring. It was good news for the young wife as well. She would rise to the position of prospective mother in the hierarchy of the family. That said, she had nine critical months in which to complete her duty and reach her goal, under the harsh conditions of limited facilities and health services. According to the UNDP Human Development Report 2007/2008, the average female in India gives birth to 3.1 children. The all-India infant mortality rate has come down to an average of fifty-six children out of a thousand. Among the poorest of the population, however, ninety-seven newborn out of a thousand die as infants. The lack of facilities also affects the mothers themselves, and 450 women out of 100, 000 die during confinement or because of postnatal symptoms. These numbers are obviously rough estimates and vary according to the organization carrying out the census. Compared with previous decades, however, there is positive development.[432]

All interviewees had witnessed the deaths of infants and children in their neighbourhood and often in their immediate family as well. As mentioned, ten of my thirty-two interviewees had lost an infant or small child. Most of the women admitted that pregnancy and the joy of forthcoming motherhood were accompanied by feelings of anxiety and insecurity. Only a few maintained that there was nothing special about their pregnancies. Most women had to run the household chores as they normally did. They were not given release from even the physically demanding tasks. Many of my informants said that they were given support by their husband and other family members, but some women had felt left alone to survive the new situation in their lives. None of the women had formal prenatal instruction. The only advice available was what the older and more experienced women and local midwives (*dhāi*) shared. The situation differed between Ganti and Janbazar. In Ganti only a few women had consulted a clinical doctor during their pregnancy – primarily in cases of serious health problems – whereas in Janbazar the majority of the women had been checked by a doctor. Most of my Ganti interviewees – some of them already aged – had not received any educated professional assistance during the pregnancy or the delivery.

[432] In the UNDP Human Development Report 2007/2008 the statistics on the fertility rate are from 2000–2005. According to the statistics of 1970–1975, the fertility rate was 5.3 children per average female. Thus within thirty years the rate has been reduced by more than two births per woman. The infant mortality rate given is from 2005. The poorest people here consist of the twenty percent of the total population having the lowest human development index. The UNDP statistics of the mother's mortality ratio is from 2000. According to UNFPA State of World Population 2007, the mother's mortality ratio based on the reported cases between 1990 and 2004 is 540 (UNFPA 2007, 87).

The state of affairs in all three communities was changing for the better due to various development initiatives. The situation of future mothers will undoubtedly be very different from their antecedents. As the three neighbourhoods were all project areas of the non-governmental organization, Lutheran World Service India (LWSI), the communities were now provided with basic education on health and nutrition as well as on maternal and child care. The LWSI staff encouraged mothers to seek professional care. In addition, various municipal and government initiaves were introduced.[433] At the time of my fieldwork periods in 2003–2004 and 2008, the majority of the young mothers in all three neighbourhoods participated in prenatal instruction, and their children were delivered by skilled personnel.

Regardless of these changes, however, pregnant women in these neighbourhoods continued to enthusiastically seek assistance and protection for themselves and the unborn child from various supernatural practices and beliefs. According to Janbazar interviewee Praba, her hardships during pregnancies made her turn to god sincerely for the first time:[434]

> When my first child was born, I was in a very bad state of health. I was very anaemic from the beginning of my pregnancy; my whole body swelled. I could not eat or drink anything for days. I vomited for nine months and was confined to bed. I was in Bihar then. I was brought to Calcutta by my father-in-law for treatment. But here the nursing home authorities found my condition very precarious and refused to admit me in the beginning saying I would shortly die anyway. But by god's mercy I lived to give birth to my daughter who sadly died after three days. With my son I left everything to god's mercy. I started to perform Jiutiyā from then on.[435]

Praba experienced this personal tragedy at the age of sixteen. She had become pregnant shortly after moving into her in-laws' house. However, she was too weak to bear the physical hardships of pregnancy. She was brought to Kolkata for treatment by her father-in-law.[436] Her survival after she was destined to die brought her face to face with what she called god, not any particular god but the general idea of god. The incident marked a change in her life. Praba lost her first daughter but when she became pregnant once again she decided to leave everything to god's mercy, and started performing Jiutiyā pūjā. In the course of her interview Praba mentioned that when she was yet unmarried she knew nothing about gods. Leaving everything to the mercy of god articulated her profound reliance on the supernatural, which she expressed by performing a certain *pūjā*. Later on, Praba claimed that the various *pūjās* had

[433] Probably the best known central government initiated scheme at the time of my study was Intergrated Child Develoment Services (ICDS), which operated nationwide among the underprivileged population in India. The project was launched in 1975 to promote maternal and child health and nutrition (fieldwork diary, 10–11 January 2008; Integrated Child Development Services [ICDS]).

[434] Praba was interviewed at her home in Janbazar on 11 February and 5 March 2004.

[435] Jiutiyā pūjā/brata is a celebration for the well-being of children.

[436] It is worth noting that it was the father-in-law who was most concerned about the unborn child, also in the case of Janbazar interviewee Unni. Unni's father-in-law even vowed to offer a goat as a sacrifice for the deity if everything went well and the child was born safely. His apprehension shows how much he valued his daughter-in-law – at least as a prospective mother and bearer of the descendants of his line.

merely a social significance for her. She devoted herself to the service of Satguru, which she believed helped her through all her difficulties. However, her first crucial religious awakening took place after she had barely survived her first pregnancy.

When women were worried about the condition of their unborn baby, some of them sought help from local healers and magicians. When Harijan Basti interviewee Bali was pregnant for the first time she was sixteen years old, and no doctors of modern medicine were available for her to consult. She was afraid that something was wrong with the unborn baby so she went to visit a Muslim healer. This is what Bali related about the visit:[437]

> When I was pregnant with my daughter it was suspected that the baby would be born prematurely. Before the delivery I went to see an old Muslim man.[438] He prepared some medicine to keep the baby in the womb and gave it to me. How hot it was (*garam garam kare*)! He gave it as though he was filled by the divine (*debyāte bharati kare*). I took the medicine and the baby stayed in the womb. I gave birth to my daughter at home.

According to Bali, the treatment she had received was more than simply being given a medicine. She remembered the presence of the old Muslim whom she had met forty years earlier, and believed the medicine had helped her to avoid a miscarriage. As the quote reveals, she also believed the man to have interceded with the divine on her behalf, and that the baby survived because of his help.

During pregnancy Ganti interviewee Bu visited a *gunina*, a local magician or paramedical healer who often uses skulls and bones of human corpses in the treatment:[439]

> I went to a *gunina* once and he had the skull of a dead body. The *gunina* circled around me three times with the skull and said that my baby was fine. Another lady also came there after taking a bath. The *gunina* told her that her baby was not well. The lady and her mother-in-law cried out loudly. But for me the visit was beneficial; I got a son.

In most Hindu traditions touching or even looking at human corpse is generally understood to be contaminating and inauspicious. Dealing with dead bodies is left to those who are thought to be suitable for it. However, in alternative healing and Bengali folk *tantra* the objects such as skulls are widely used.[440] They are believed to bring good luck and fortune, and give pro-

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[437] Bali was interviewed at her home in Harijan Basti on 9 February 2004.

[438] The Muslim healer Bali here refers to is most likely *pir*, 'a Sufi saint/master', or *ojhā*, 'an excorcist' or 'shaman'. *Pir* is a Persian term and literally means 'an old (person)' and denotes a spiritual headman or guide among Muslim mystics called Sufis. Among Bengali Muslims, *pir* is more than a holy man, saint, or spiritual guide; he is also considered a demi-god (Karim 1988, 280).

[439] See, for example, McDaniel 2004, 77; Niyogi 1987, 111–113. Bu was interviewed on 1 March 2004 in Ganti. According to some of my interviewees, barren women and women hoping for a child also visited *gunina.*

[440] The term *tantra* is complex and there is no commonly accepted definition of it; yet there are cluster of definitions which serve different purposes and related ideas. For some, *tantra* is a type of text, for others, it is a kind of ritual practice. *Tantra* may also refer to a set of magical rituals that mainly low caste and tribal people practise to

tective energy (*śakti*) to their holder. Skulls are used as relics that mediate the supernatural world, calling down the deity to help the practitioner and give her power.[441]

The skull that the *gunina* used while treating Bu was obviously believed to act as a magical object with extraordinary power. The power was thought to have potential for both good and bad. *Gunina* did not touch Bu with the skull but circled it around her. This act was thought to radiate the power of the skull, or it was done to help the *gunina* gain insight into Bu's situation. After the treatment, the *gunina* reported to Bu the good news about the baby. After she had a son Bu was convinced that visiting the *gunina* was beneficial for her, as opposed to the lady treated by the *gunina* after her, who learned that her baby was not well.

Besides magical methods, most of the interviewees had asked the divinities for protection for themselves and for their unborn baby. Some deities were thought to have a particular protective capacity. It was not rare for relatives of the pregnant woman to want to contribute to the well-being of the mother and unborn child by approaching protective divinities. When Ganti interviewee Sada became pregnant, she did not go to the temple of her favourite deity; instead, she informed her in-laws and requested them to worship the deity in her name:[442]

> When I got pregnant, I asked my father-in-law and mother-in-law to go quickly and invoke the Pencho Bhāji goddess who resides in Chestola. They called the goddess and gave her water. I like this goddess. Her *pūjā* is every Tuesday. But, I have not given a thing to this goddess, because if I prepare something, I do not know whether the goddess will like it or not. She is an angry type.

Sada doubted if her gifts would please the powerful goddess Pencho Bhāji, who was one of the goddesses believed to have the power to grant children. Therefore, Sada sent her in-laws to worship the deity. This may be interpreted to mean that she did not want to take the risk of displeasing the temperamental goddess. Sada mentioned that the deity had an angry nature, and if the goddess was not satisfied with the gifts she might be irritated and potentially harmful to her. Yet, she wanted someone to offer the deity gifts because she believed in the special capacity of Pencho Bhāji. Ganti interviewee Rani did not see a problem in visiting Pencho Bhāji, and she advised other pregnant women to address the goddess:[443]

> Before you have a child you must go to (the temple of) this goddess (refers to Pencho Bhāji) and get an amulet (*māduli*). After the child has been in the womb for four months, you must come (to the temple) and tell the goddess. There is a Brahman

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gain magical powers, similar to the experience of Bu. The *tantric* ritual is generally understood by its practitioners as the ability to heal or harm. McDaniel defines the Bengali folk *tantra* as the use of ritual practice (meditation with *mantra, mudrā,* and *yantra*) to gain religious wisdom and access to the goddess, as well as to gain supernatural power (McDaniel 2004, 69–70).

[441] McDaniel 2001, 72.

[442] Sada was interviewed at her home in Ganti on 1 March 2004.

[443] Rani was interviewed at her home in Ganti on 2 February 2004.

> (priest) and through him you can let the goddess know. He smears the mother-to-be with oil mixed with soil (*tela-māṭi*) for good luck (*paya*).[444]

Rani's quote suggests that women were to inform the goddess Pencho Bhāji about their condition after four months of pregnancy. The requirement for protection is thus articulated. From then on the prospective mother is believed to be under the protection of the goddess, the sign of which is the paste smeared by the Brahman.

*Sādha* – fulfilling the longings of the pregnant woman

In the three communities of this study, several families practised an old custom called giving of *sādha*, fulfilling the longings of the pregnant woman.[445] According to the interviewees, giving of *sādha* nowadays does not have the same significance as earlier, for women are not in as much danger during pregnancy as they previously were. Nowadays it is understood as more of an occasion to celebrate, enjoy food together, and treat the prospective mother with gifts. Harijan Basti interviewee Raji explained the custom as follows:[446]

> When there were no doctors in our country, many women died giving birth to their children. They neither got proper food nor enough nutrients. Besides, babies were delivered at home. Even nowadays here in our neighbourhood we have women giving birth at home. Because of this, mothers died. That is why there is *sādha*. At seven months (of pregnancy) the mother is given the food she wishes. When a new daughter-in-law comes into a house and she becomes pregnant, the mother, mother's sister (*māsi*) and father's sister (*pisi*) all give her *sādha*. They give new clothes, a petticoat, and they indulge her with sweets, curd (*dadhi*), and all kinds of food. They also paint vermilion on the hairparting (*sindūra*).[447] Only women do this.

Interviewed women had diverse ideas about the practical details of conducting the *sādha.* The customs and timing of the celebration varied according to the family and community:[448]

> In my house I had *sādha* at five months (of pregnancy). At the home of my father and mother-in-law, *sādha* is held at seven months. Most people have it at seven months. (Mila, Ganti)

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[444] The smearing of oil was also used by my informants for protection from evil effects.

[445] The term *sādha* can be translated as 'desire', 'longing', 'wish', 'choice', or 'fancy'. The occasion is usually referred to as giving of *sādha* (*sādha deoyā*) (Biswas 2000).

[446] Raji was interviewed in Harijan Basti on 5 February 2004.

[447] *Sindūra* is an auspicious sign of the married status worn especially in the area of Bengal and neighbouring regions. The bridegroom draws *sindūra* on the hairparting of a bride for the first time during the marriage ceremony, and since then she is expected to draw it every day until the death of her husband (Banglapedia).

[448] Mila was interviewed in Ganti on 28 January 2004. Ru was interviewed on 2 December 2003, and Sule on 29 January 2004, both in Harijan Basti.

> I was given *sādha* at seven and nine months. (Ru, Harijan Basti)

> When I had my daughter, my mother gave *sādha* for me. It was held when I was seven months pregnant. With the eldest son I was also given *sādha*, but with the youngest one I did not have it. (Sule, Harijan Basti)

*Sādha* was given primarily in the uneven months of pregnancy starting from the fifth month. Some women were given *sādha* twice, in the seventh and ninth months, for instance. The giving of *sādha* with a first child was usually celebrated with more grandeur than with the following children. Ganti interviewee Rani remembered her first pregnancy and the attention she was given at *sādha*:[449]

> I was sixteen years when my first child was in my womb. When I was five months pregnant, they fed me with five different kinds of sweets. It is a long time ago; I do not remember anymore. When I got my first child, it (*sādha*) was done for me, but when the next ones came, it did not happen anymore. They gave me *sādha* at seven months. They gave me a new sari. They dressed me and I felt so ashamed. They said that mothers wear only a sari. I wore a sari with a blouse. They made me dance. They fed me rice-porridge (*pāyasa*) from the plate. They put some on a plate and five of them fed me from the same vessel. They gave me money.

For a young wife, *sādha* can be seen as a sort of rite of passage, the mark of becoming a mother. The young wife is recognized and shown respect as a prospective mother by her female relatives. In the case of Rani it was shown by dressing her in a sari, a garment worn especially by grown-up women.[450] The giving of money also marked her new position.

It is most likely that the celebration of *sādha* is connected to a prenatal rite (*saṃskāra*) of hairparting (Sīmantonnayana) originating from the householder's ritual manual (Gṛhyasūtras) and Smṛti tradition.[451] Pandey maintains that this rite initially stems from the beliefs that a

[449] Rani was interviewed in Ganti on 2 February 2004.

[450] Other interviewees did not mention that *sādha* would mark the wearing of the sari for the first time. The pregnant woman was given saries, but other than that, it did not play a very central role in the feast.

[451] The *saṃskāra* of hairparting (Sīmantonnayana) is one of the sixteen rites of passage that the key textual sources – Gṛhyasūtras, Smṛti literature, and Purāṇas – include in the main *saṃskāras,* and that has become popular and important in the Hindu tradition. Depending on the source, the number of *saṃskāras* varies from twelve to forty-eight, and they cover the whole span of human life beginning with the rites of conception and finishing with the funeral rites and rituals performed in reverence of the ancestors. Pandey suggests that *saṃskāras* have both a popular and cultural purpose (Pandey 1994, 25–32). In his view, rituals in general are motivated by the unquestioned faith of common folk in superstitious beliefs as well as by their material needs. People adhere to rituals because they believe that they are surrounded by superhuman influences which have the potential for good or evil consequences. Since these influences can interfere in every important occasion in one's life, they try to remove hostile influences and attract beneficial ones in order to prosper without external hindrances. *Saṃskāras* are also performed to draw material benefits such as progeny, a long life, wealth, prosperity, strength, and intellect. Pandey confirms the reciprocal view of the Hindu ritual and argues that most Hindus believe that by prayer and appeal their desires and wishes are communicated to the deities who respond to them in the form of children, animals, a good physique, and a sharp intellect, for instance. *Saṃskāras* are also used to express joy, felicitations and sorrow at various events of the life-cycle. Pandey sees the cultural purpose of *saṃskāras* to be the meanings that the performance of the rites of passages is generally endowed with. For example, the proper conduct is be-

woman in her pregnancy is subject to attacks of evil spirits, and some rites should be performed to ward them off.[452] The performance of this rite was believed to bring about prosperity to the mother and long life to the unborn child. The recommended time for the rite of hairparting varied according to the literal source and tradition.[453] It was usually celebrated in uneven months starting from the fifth month of pregnancy up to the birth of a child, a situation parallel to the celebration of *sādha*. The timing of the hairparting rite was based originally on the knowledge of physiology, since it was thought that the formation of the mind begins from the fifth month of pregnancy. The Smṛti-authors believed that every action of an expectant mother influenced the unborn child; the pregnant woman was required to take utmost care to facilitate this process, avoiding any physical shock to the foetus. This responsibility and requirement for protection was then symbolically emphasized by parting the hair of the prospective mother.[454]

Harijan Basti interviewee Raji mentioned that during the *sādha* female relatives draw vermilion on the hairparting (*sindūra*) of a pregnant woman, an act which is done by the bridegroom at the marriage ceremony. Apparently in the celebration of *sādha* the act of parting the hair has been replaced by the act of drawing the *sindūra.* At least these two seem to have more or less parallel functions. As an auspicious sign *sindūra* is thought bring a blessing but also to have protective capacity, the same as the original purpose of the act of hairparting.

Another essential element that indicates the connection between the giving of *sādha* and the rite of hairparting is the practice of fulfilling the wishes of the pregnant woman, with, however, a certain difference in carrying this out. During the *sādha* celebration the wishes of the prospective mother were fulfilled by other women, but according to the guidelines of Vedic author Yājñavalkya, it is indeed the husband who should satisfy the longings of the pregnant wife.[455] He states: "By not meeting the wishes of a pregnant woman, foetus becomes unhealthy; it is either deformed or it falls down. Therefore, one should do as desired by her".[456] My interviewees did not justify the giving of *sādha* on the basis of the risks to the foetus but on the basis of the risks to the mother herself.

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lieved to wash away the impurities generated by liminal states like birth and death, and help a person to attain liberation from the cycle of rebirths (*mokṣa*). Performing *saṃskāras* also has cultural significance in the sense that it brings social privileges and rights to the individual. It is morally a correct way to act, and the right conduct is thought to finally grow and ripen into moral virtues (Babb 1975, 69–71; Das 1997a, 110–111; Flood 1996, 201–208; McGee 2004; Tachikawa & al. 2001, 91–92).

[452] Pandey 1994, 64.

[453] Some textual sources on *saṃskāras* – though later and secondary compared to the main textual sources – have been a major influence on the performance of *saṃskāras* because of their great detail. The texts called Prayogas (practical handbooks), Paddhatis (guide-books or manuals) and Kariakas (versified presentations of rituals) have been supplementing the Gṛhyasūtras by giving elaborate explanations on complete rituals and ceremonies and introducing new materials (Karttunen 1998, 119; Pandey 1994, 7). An exploration of these literal sources is, however, beyond the scope of my study.

[454] Pandey 1994, 64, 67.

[455] Yājñavalkya is a Vedic sage, reputedly the author of the *White Yajurveda*, *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa*, as well as the code of law *Yājñavalkyasmṛti*. He also figures in the epics, especially in *Rāmāyaṇa* (Klostermaier 1998, 211).

[456] *Yājñavalkyasmṛti* III. 79. Quoted by Pandey 1994, 69.

### 5.2.2 Dealing with birth waste

#### Managing childbirths: role of the midwife

Before dealing with natal and postnatal ritual practices and beliefs I will briefly discuss the circumstances and current trends concerning childbearing among the interviewed. As I listened to childbirth narratives it became clear that there was some variation in childbearing practices in the three research communities. In Janbazar the oldest interviewees and those living permanently in the village had given birth to their children at home with the assistance of a local midwife (*dhāi*) or a female relative; the majority, however, had been admitted to a hospital with skilled personnel. Home deliveries were much more common in Harijan Basti than in Janbazar, where families often thought that hospital casre was unnecessary or they could not afford it. The situation in Harijan Basti was changing, however, and several women who had given birth to their first child at home went to the hospital for subsequent deliveries. In Ganti the scene was more traditional. Some young mothers had their children at hospitals with the help of professional nurses but nine out of my eleven interviewees had given birth at home or outdoors, some without any help. Blanchet's fieldwork on childbirths in Bangladesh in the 1970s and 1980s reveals that among low caste people only two births out of 103 were assisted by *dhāi*. Thirty-eight births were managed by the mothers on their own and the remaining 62 with the assistance of female family members.[457]

While it was evident that the number of home deliveries was decreasing in all three neighbourhoods, most of the older women interviewed had given birth to their children at home with the assistance of a local self-learned midwife (*dhāi*). In the villages of the Bengal region and the surrounging areas this has been a prevailing practice up until the present. According to the UNDP Human Development Report 2007/2008, approximately forty-three percent of the total births in India between 1997 and 2005 were attended by skilled personnel. The percentage is obviously less among the non-privileged population. Juri, one of the older Ganti interviewees, had given birth to eleven children, all of them with the assistance of a *dhāi*:[458]

> I had all my children at home. At that time there were no hospitals. A local midwife (*dhāi*) came to my house. This was the case with everyone. No one went to hospital, *dhāi* came to help us. I had my four sons and seven daughters at home. I have never in my life gone to hospital.

All interviewees had heard of the local midwives (*dhāi*) and most of them could identify the *dhāis* of their surrounding locality. The immediate neighbourhoods of Harijan Basti and Janbazar did not have a *dhāi* of their own, whereas Ganti had at least two *dhāis* still practising their profession.[459] According to Gauri Sarkar, one of the *dhāis* living in Ganti, home deliver-

[457] Blanchet 1984, 79.

[458] Juri was interviewed in Ganti on 11 March 2004.

[459] Fieldwork diary, 16 September 2003.

ies still occurred quite often, even if people increasingly went to hospitals for deliveries. If women expected complications they, in Mrs. Sarkar's view, went to the hospital, but if they were in a good condition they preferred having the child at home with her assistance. Gauri herself had learned the skill from her mother-in-law, whom she recalled as a highly talented and revered *dhāi.* According to her, the role of the *dhāi* in earlier times was somewhat different than nowadays. As there were no doctors available *dhāis* were consulted on any health issue, not only in cases of childbirths. The role of the *dhāi* resembled that of a local nurse. Gauri never charged for her service, yet people respected her and gave according to their ability.[460]

The interview with Gauri indicated that she herself valued her skill and that she was respected among her people. The role of the *dhāi* among the people of Bijnor District, UP, as portrayed by Jeffery & al., was quite different. In the communities they studied, the *dhāi*'s duty was mainly to manage the birth waste. The *dhāi* herself did not monitor the delivery but followed the orders of a senior attendant. The *dhāi* arrived at the delivery house only after labour had started. She was there to perform the menial tasks of cleaning the blood, tying the cord, cutting of the cord, burying the placenta, bathing the mother, and cleaning the delivery house – all under the instruction of others. The *dhāi* had a very lowly position within the community. She was an unwanted guest on all other occasions at childbirth, and even her relatives considered her as polluted. She was able to perform her defiling duties only because she was of lowly origin, of the low communities managing menial tasks for others.[461]

The portrait of Bangladeshi *dhāis* introduced by Uusikylä fall somewhere between Gantian *dhāi* Mrs. Sarkar and the *dhāis* of Bijnor. The "midwife's work was seen [as] defiling; it was not an occupation that any young women would consider for themselves", yet, the *dhāis* in Mayapara "enjoyed respect in their community, and their work was valued" (Uusikylä 2000, 159).[462] Far from being segregated from the rest of the community, the *dhāis* of Mayapara were in many respects active members of the surrounding society. The difference in the role of *dhāis* may be given a variety of explanations. For instance, Mrs. Sarkar was a *dhāi* of a low caste community. She was operating among people who were of low origin themselves. While her work was to deal with waste, she was considered a professional in her own field. Another possibility explanation is the regional differences in organizing the health sector and managing childbirths. If there are no nurses or other attendants available for deliveries, the role of the *dhāi* is likely to grow in importance. And the opposite; if there are nurses, attendants, or other professionals available, the role of the *dhāi* is reduced to mere cleaner of birth waste.

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[460] Fieldwork diary, 11–12 January 2008. Blanchet reports that there is a belief as regards paying for the service of *dhāis,* according to which the *dhāi* should be rewarded properly "or else the ritual pollution of birth will not be amended and the child will not get protection from the gods" (Blanchet 1984, 93).

[461] Jeffery & al. 1989, 108–109.

[462] In carrying out his fieldwork in Lucknow Khare interviewed an untouchable *dhāi*. He was told that *dhāi* is respected for her midwifery skills during the delivery, but afterwards many find her defiling and avoid her presence (Khare 1998, 157–161).

*Ātura* – segregation of the impure, or mother's retreat after the delivery?

As noted previously, a prospective mother, among the communities studied, was highly regarded during pregnancy. The position of the mother, however, changed as the due date approached and the delivery was about to begin.[463] Most women maintained that during and after the delivery both the mother and child were considered impure. Raji, one of the Harijan Basti interviewees, referred to the mother in a postnatal situation as an untouchable (*achuta*).[464] With few exceptions, most interviewees intended to observe *ātura,* a period of restraining oneself from outside contacts to avoid spreading natal pollution, even though it was not always possible in their congested neighbourhood.[465] It must be noted that the period of *ātura,* while primarily referred to as segregation of mother and child due to birth pollution, apparently functioned also as a time for a mother to rest after the delivery. Uusikylä in her study on childbirths in Bangladesh discusses the period of confinement after the delivery as the time the mother and child are ordered to spend in the delivery house (*chādighara*), but do not refer to it as *ātura.*[466] The period of isolation, in Uusikylä's study, was justified by birth pollution and by protecting the mother and child from evil spirits.[467] Similar to my interviewees, the informants of Uusikylä held that the period of confinement was also a time to recover from the physical strain following labour.[468]

[463] See, for example, Jeffery & al. 1989, 150; Jeffery & Jeffery 1996, 21.

[464] The same view is presented in Jeffery & al. 1989, 126.

[465] The Bengali-speaking interviewees in Ganti and in Harijan Basti used either the term *ātura* or *antara* when referring to the period of segregation after childbirth. An analysis of the interviews indicates that women used these terms more or less synonymously. *Ātura* literally means 'sick', 'afflicted', or 'distressed', whereas *antara* means 'distance', 'interval', or 'intervening distance'. The term *ātura* can be understood to mean something like 'sick leave', whereas *antara* has a connotation referring to 'a space or time between two things' – the birth and the ending of the impurity. For example, *antarāla bartī* refers to something or someone 'hidden from view'; 'lying' or 'living behind a screen' (Biswas 2000). For the sake of uniformity I use the term *ātura* as the majority of my interviewees did. Within quotes, however, I use the same term as the interviewee herself. Even if the term *ātura* was not used in Janbazar, the practices during the period of confinement after childbirth were similar to those described by my Harijan Basti and Ganti interviewees.

[466] Uusikylä 2000, 176–177. In the discourse of the women interviewed the delivery house was referred to as *āturaghara.* This term was used, for example, by Blanchet in her study on birth rituals in rural Bangladesh (Blanchet 1984, 75, 99–100).

[467] The role of evil spirits, particularly *bhūta,* in threatening the parturient women is discussed by Blanchet 1984, 50–57. Blanchet also mentions a custom of lighting a fire after birth, which is found all over South-East Asia. In her view, this is done both for the comfort of the mother and for chasing evil spirits away (Blanchet 1984, 88). The practice of heating of the mother´' is also listed by Uusikylä as one of the most common post-partum rituals (Uusikylä 2000, 168). Even if my interviewees protected themselves against evil spirits on various occasions, none of them mentioned the custom of lighting of a fire after childbirth or of 'the heating of the mother'.

[468] Uusikylä 2000, 177.

Those interviewees who did not observe the *ātura* gave as their reason that they simply had no chance to refrain from the household chores. Janbazar interviewee Sumi said that she was too busy to take a rest after her deliveries:[469]

> After giving birth to my babies, I did not do any *pūjās* or *bratas*. I was so busy working. No one was taking care of me and I did all the work myself. Since the day I gave birth to my child, I did cooking, and walked around without any problem. I continued my work right after the delivery.

Sumi did not have her family in the immediate neighbourhood of Janbazar, and since her relatives did not come to assist her, she was left without a choice. She had to take the responsibility of running the household right after childbirth. Sumi did not complain about the state of affairs but seemed proud of having managed the situation on her own. Unlike Sumi, however, most of the women interviewed observed the period of *ātura.* The timing and restrictions concerning *ātura* differed between families and neighbourhoods. The women described their obedience to *ātura* as follows:[470]

> After delivery there is a time that one is debarred from touching anything. If the family has a choice, the mother is allowed to rest from one to one and a half months, even five to six months.[471] When there is no helping hand around, you commence the daily routine after fifteen to sixteen days, after clipping your nails and purifying yourself by bathing. Since I had no one around to assist me, I had to visit the kitchen after fifteen days. Though my sister had come to help me, she was far too young to independently do the household chores. My father-in-law had to be served food at six in the morning. So I had to do it. In our community we clip our nails and soap our hair after fifteen days. We also observe the rule that we do not visit the kitchen if we have our periods. (Unni)

> I observed *ātura* for twenty-one days. During that time I stayed with the child. I did not cook. I remained alone and was not involved in anything. They gave me tea. I did not go anywhere. When I was finished, I was able to do all the work again. (Banu)

> During the *ātura* we stay at home sleeping. We do not go out, we stay in a separate room. After *ātura* we take a bath and finish the *ātura*. The barber (*nāpit*) comes and cuts our nails and hair. During the *ātura* the mother-in-law usually cooks the meals. If there is no mother-in-law, then mother (of the new mother) comes and cooks. If there is

[469] Sumi was interviewed at her home in Janbazar on 11 February 2004.

[470] Unni was interviewed in Janbazar on 6 January 2004. Banu was interviewed in Harijan Basti on 10 March 2004. Bu was interviewed at her home in Ganti on 1 March 2004, and Mila on 28 January 2004. It must be noted that Janbazar interviewees did not use the term *ātura* in referring to the period of segregation.

[471] In Uusikylä's fieldwork area, a period of confinement of seven days was followed by the observing of partial pollution up to forty days (*challiś dina*) after the delivery. During that time women were to remain inside their house, and avoid hard work, bathing in the pond and sexual intercourse. Uusikylä pointed out that the length of the post-partum seclusion depended to a great deal on the wealth of the family (Uusikylä 2000, 194–195).

> no mother, then the husband has to cook, but nobody can eat from the hands of a woman who has given birth. After twenty-one days, after bathing, she can cook again. (Bu)
>
> After the delivery I was well. They bathed the child and made a nice bed for me and the baby, and gave the baby to me. I had to stay in a separate room. […] (During the *antara*) we do not give *pūjā* in the morning or in the evening, nor do we enter the room of the gods (*ṭhākuraghara*). They cleaned for me a place for meals and gave me rice. Those who were living close to us did not visit us. They brought some rice on a leaf, but otherwise they did not come. I ate the rice I was given. They gave me water to wash the plate and I left it drying upside down. (Mila)

Among the women studied the duration of *ātura* ranged from between three days to one month. Even if the mother was given more time to rest, the cleansing bath and celebration closing the *ātura* was held at latest one month after childbirth. Some women extended the period of *ātura* in the case of girl child. For instance, in Juri's family they had one month of *ātura* for the baby girl and twenty-one days for the baby boy.[472] Juri mentioned that they were strict about this rule fearing that "something might follow" if they were not.

Those observing the *ātura* restrained themselves at least from cooking, moving around freely, and conducting the religious duties of the household. Women were not allowed to enter the kitchen or the corner where the food was prepared, neither were they permitted to touch or remain close to the food items used in cooking. They were not supposed to take food themselves, but had to wait to be served.[473] Ganti interviewee Mila reported that her family had followed strict purity regulations as regards eating during the *ātura* back in her village in Sundarban. According to the local custom, food was left for Mila only after her female relatives had cleaned the eating place. After finishing her meal she was given water to wash the plate. Other women did not touch her plate before Mila washed it and left it drying.[474] According to Jeffery & al., the well-being of a new mother depends greatly on the female members of her in-laws; on how willing they are to meet her needs.

Many of the women interviewed told that during the *ātura* they were expected to give up social contacts and remain isolated from others, since the natal pollution threatened to befoul the whole house. I was also told that childbirths previously took place in separate room (*āturaghara*) next to the main house, and that woman and child were expected to spend the total *ātura* in that room.[475] In Janbazar the tradition was for woman and child to remain in the delivery room from three to six days, during which time the husband was not allowed to even look at his wife or child. This tradition was still followed by many women who give birth to their children in their

[472] Juri was interviewed at her house in Ganti on 11 March 2004.

[473] A similar practice was also observed by Jeffery & al. The mother observing the segregation was not allowed to request anyone's services. She had to wait for others to fulfil her needs (Jeffery & al.1989, 149).

[474] Blanchet reported that in her fieldwork areas it was customary to serve the food to the mother in earthenware vessels, which were broken once the period of pollution was over (Blanchet 1984, 100).

[475] The practices, customs and beliefs concerning the delivery chambers are reported by Stevenson 1920.

native villages. In the city environment the custom was followed as far as it was practical.[476] According to some of the informants, these delivery rooms have a bad reputation nowadays. They had heard that women and children had been left there without being properly washed and that some had even died under these conditions. As most children in the city are nowadays delivered at hospitals there are no separate rooms for deliveries and *ātura*. Most women observed *ātura* in a segregated corner of the room, or, if the family's house had more than a single room, she was given a room for herself and the baby. In some families, the mother and newborn child were separated from others by a removeable wall within a room.

In observing and conversing with the people in the fieldwork areas, it became clear that the significance, practices, and attitude towards the *ātura* were in a process of change. First, there was a tendency to shorten the *ātura*. In most families the new mother was needed if things were to run smoothly at home. In the urban city environment where both women and men are engaged in earning money outside the home, families had no female relatives available to assist them with the household chores for several weeks. Second, the full adherence to *ātura* was inconvenient and impossible in the city where people were compelled to be in close contact with one another in small, one-room apartments. For these reasons most families no longer strictly obeyed the regulations of *ātura*. For example, I had a chat with a mother who had given birth to her child a few days earlier. That mother was visited by other women and the newborn was shown to the neighbours during the time she was supposed to observe the *ātura*. Even though women in all three communities were ignoring some traditional restrictions related to *ātura*, there was still a strict demand for purity before the mother could start running the house rituals, return to the kitchen, and serve food to others.

## Cleansing the natal waste

As stated above, mother and child were believed to be contaminated by their own secretions during and after childbirth. Jeffery & al. point out that childbirth pollution, while believed to be potentially damaging and harmful, also represents power.[477] The mother, as possessing potential evil powers, could damage and defile not only herself but also others. Uusikylä asserts that villagers of Mayapara considered childbirth to be auspicious yet polluting, the fear of which increased if there was an anomaly during or after the birth.[478] The process of purification consisted of both general and more family-specific customs. In order to complete the purifying process, it was thought that each phase had to be taken care of by a suitable occupational group with the capacity to remove the risks involved in birth pollution. Janbazar interviewee Unni elaborated on the particulars of the purification process as follows:[479]

[476] Fieldwork diary, 28 October 2003.

[477] Jeffery & al. 1989, 124.

[478] Uusikylä 2000, 172.

[479] Unni was interviewed at her home in Janbazar on 6 January 2004.

> Midwives do the bathing of the child. People of the house do not perform it. The midwives of the Chamar community do it here. The Chamar midwives also do the cleaning. If one (the mother) does it by herself, purification is not complete. The mother needs their assistance to purify the baby and herself. The barber also visits and takes care of clipping the nails. Unless the barber does this job, the process of purification remains incomplete. In the village every member of the family, also the menfolk, go through this ritual. The nails of both baby and family members are cut. The nails must be clipped because they are from the womb. […] When the baby is in the mother's womb, she or he has nails and hair. We consider them dirty after birth, so they are discarded. They tonsure (shave the head of) the baby, not the mother.

Unni emphasizes the importance of having the right people do the required tasks at various stages of purification. In contrast to my Ganti interviewees and the *dhāi* Mrs. Sarkar, Unni seemed to regard the role of the midwife primarily as the agent eligible to remove the immediate birth waste. According to her, the natal waste was removed completely only if the procedure was properly conducted. Because natal pollution was believed to infect family members as well, they also were involved. Clipping the nails of the newborn baby was a custom most families in the three communities followed. Even the only Muslim woman told me that three days after returning from the hospital she cut the baby's and her own nails. Usually the nails were clipped by a local barber, who was called either *nāpit* or *parāmānika.* The barber was asked to come from one to three times before the purification was complete. Some families, among them Bu's and Unni's, had a custom of offering the shaved hair of the baby to a deity and bringing it to the temple:[480]

> My daughter-in-law does *mānata*. She takes the hair of her children to the temple of Mā Kālī. It is our custom to take the hair of children to the feet of the god. We also bring a plate where we have sweets, rice (*cāla*), and pulse (*dāla*). It is done for the well-being of the child, so that he or she will stay healthy. (Bu)

> After my son was born, my father-in-law fulfilled his promise. The head of my child was tonsured as an offering and we sacrificed a goat. It is customary for us to offer hair to appease god. We leave it at the feet of the goddess. (Unni)

In both quotes the offering of hair was done to fulfil a promise (*mānasika*) made to the goddess in exchange for the gift of the child. Hair was thought to be an emblem of a child who had been born through the favour of a deity, and the hair was offered to remind the goddess to protect the child. The Gṛhyasūtras mention a *saṃskāra* of tonsuring the child (Chūḍakaraṇa in Sanskrit and Chūṭkaraṇa in Bengali), which in the scriptures is ordered to be performed at the age of one, or at the end of the third year at the latest.[481] According to the Gṛhyasūtras, the purpose of performing the Chūṭkaraṇa is to assure a long life and prosperity for the child. Traditionally the ceremony consisted of wetting the head, praying to the razor, inviting the barber, and cutting the hair repeating Vedic verses and wishes for a long life. According to Pandey, the connection between

[480] Bu was interviewed in Ganti on 1 March 2004. About Unni, see the above footnote.

[481] The rite of tonsuring in Bengali is also called Mundana or Keśamundana.

the common custom of offering the hair of a newborn to a deity and the tonsuring of a child is unknown to the Gṛhyasūtras and Smṛti literature.[482] In the popular mind and practices these customs nevertheless coincide. For example, Unni's family had a tradition of tonsuring the head of the newborn, and then offering the hair to the deity. These two acts were clearly seen as following one another. According to Jeffery & al., shaving the newborn's head is equally practised by Hindus and Muslims in India.[483]

In the case of home deliveries the interviewees described certain customs of processing the actual birth waste so that it would not continue contaminating the house. The most polluting birth waste, the placenta, umbilical cord, and soiled fabrics, were usually buried in the ground either by the midwife, family members, or even by the mother herself. Ganti interviewees Rani and Juri, and Harijan Basti interviewee Pho elaborate on the practices:[484]

> I gave birth to my child at night. In the morning they (members of the household) came and cut the umbilical cord (*nāṛi*) and cleaned us. They collected all the waste and covered it with mud. They cleaned the clothes and took fabrics that were dirty and covered them with mud. That was is. One could not see them anymore. (Rani)
>
> If someone gives birth at home, they bury the placenta (*phula*) somewhere outside. (Pho)
>
> A midwife (*dhāi*) cleaned the baby, took the placenta, and buried it in the ground. The midwife was also our barber (*parāmānika*). We had to shave three times. She cut the umbilical cord. Then the barber returned again to shave the baby. When we had the day of Ṣaṣṭhī pūjā the baby's nails were cut again. (Juri)

For most women it did not matter where the placenta was buried, as long as it was removed out of sight. Among Uusikylä's informants, the placenta was always buried near the mother's paternal house.[485] In Jeffery & al.'s fieldwork, the practices were more varied: The placenta was buried either in the midden of the neighbourhood or in a pit inside the house, often depending on the gender of the child. Keeping the placenta inside the house was meant to protect it from those working magic on it and thus potentially harming the mother and child. Barren women wishing to conceive were particularly suspect.[486]

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[482] Pandey 1994, 94–96. It should be remembered that the prevailing ritual practices and customs are a result of a long chain of dialogue between the practice and text, of compromises and assimilation of influences. The connection of tonsure and offering of the hair seems rather self-explanatory.

[483] Jeffery & al. 1989, 128.

[484] Rani was interviewed on 2 February 2004 and Juri on 11 March 2004, both of them in Ganti. Pho was interviewed in Harijan Basti on 4 March 2004.

[485] Uusikylä 2000, 166–168. Uusikylä mentions a custom of burying the placenta in a new clay pot with turmeric, cowry shells, and betel nuts, a practice current in some places in West Bengal.

[486] Jeffery & al. 1989, 107. See also Blanchet 1984, 86. Kolenda, having done fieldwork in a North Indian village, Khalapur, asserts that "woman's fear of losing a child through the ill-will of envious barren females is reflected in a strong belief in the malevolent ghosts of childless women" (Kolenda 1981, 214).

In conducting her study Blanchet figured that the placenta, even if buried, was still thought to contain some power.[487] For my Ganti interviewee Swara, the very place where she buried her placenta, turned into a place of worship: "I buried the placenta into the soil at night", she said, "We give *pūjā* at that place (*māṭi-tala*)".[488] Swara's practice shows in a very concrete way the belief in the power of birth pollution. An object that was considered dirty and contaminating turned into an object of worship, because her people believed in its potential power.[489] As in the case of the *gunina* using the human skull, within the Śākta tradition critical objects are often believed to contain potential power that simply have to be channeled correctly for a positive outcome. It is likely that for Swara, as a member of a tribal community, the worship of the placenta had a connection to the fertility cult in general.

The purifying process after childbirth, in the view of the interviewed women, included at least observing *ātura*, bathing, cutting the nails of the baby and mother, shaving the child, and closing the *ātura* by celebrating a *pūjā.* The process was like a step-by-step revitalization of the mother and child in which they were gradually admitted into normal life. It was also a time for a mother to give her full attention to the baby. In the opinion of Ganti interviewee Parbo, the baby becomes a human only by completing the *ātura*. None of the interviewees admitted that they were bothered by the fact that they were considered unclean after the childbirth. It was more of a practical issue, which was to be taken care of. Even with the inconvieniences involved with it, there was tendency to regard the segregation and the process of purification as a time for the mother to recover from childbirth. This is the way Ganti interviewee Mila narrated the process of purification she employed at her in-laws' house:[490]

> I had *antara* on the ninth day, the twenty-first, and when the baby was one month old.[491] One has to make three *antaras* during the first month (after the delivery). On the ninth day our barber (*nāpit*) clipped the nails of all family members staying in the house. […] After clipping the nails on the ninth day they all were fine. My and my son's *antara* still continued. After that I was able to go out to wash my and my baby's clothes. During the (first) nine days I could not do that. But now I was able to go out. (After that) others washed my plate. I was not allowed to enter the house. […] Then came the twenty-first day. On the twentieth day they told me that I should take all the clothes I was wearing and wash them. So I washed all of them. I also washed some things of my mother-in-law and father-in-law. The next day the barber came again, cut the nails of my son, and shaved his hair. After eating, the barber went away. Then after

[487] Blanchet 1984, 89.

[488] Swara was interviewed in Ganti on 16 February 2004.

[489] The special power of the afterbirth is also discussed by Uusikylä. She mentions a practice of people collecting the afterbirth of women also in hospital deliveries and burying it in front of the mother's paternal house (Uusikylä 2000, 173).

[490] Mila was interviewed in Ganti on 28 January 2004.

[491] Mila gives the term *antara* a slightly different interpretation from what the other women had given. By *antara* she refers to the intervening occasions during the time of segregation (*ātura*) when the child and mother are given cleansing baths and the barber comes to clip the nails of the family members and shave the head of the baby.

> one month, we fed the Brahman and invited the barber. We went to the house of the maternal uncle, the son and all the relatives; the house of my elder sister, mother's sister, and father's sister. For the male child we made Ānanda Ṣaṣṭhī pūjā. That day there was a big crowd. We gave sweets and sweetmeats to god at *pūjā-ghāṭa* (terrace usually by a river or a pond where people offered gifts to deities). It was Ṣaṣṭhī pūjā. They dressed me in new clothes. My son was clothed with a new shirt (*jāmā*). Silver and gold were given. There is a *pūjā* that day. Grandmothers (*ṭhākurmā* and *didimā*) dance and sing. What fun! […] It is not only for a son, it is for a child. […] If we have a girl or boy it is the same for us. When the *pūjā* according to our rules (*niyama*) is finished, I can cook, wash plates, move around, do the *pūjās,* and go to the room of the gods.

One of the most essential elements in the cleansing of the natal waste was bathing. Some women mentioned an old belief, according to which mother and child were to be kept waiting for the first bath in the delivery room for days. This was because the child was thought to catch a cold or to contract some other physical problem.[492] This custom, however, was not followed in the neighbourhoods studied. Women said that nowadays the child is usually given the first bath by a midwife immediately after the delivery. The bathing given after delivery has common elements with the bathing conducted before the performance of a ritual. It is not just the washing of dirt from the physical body; it also implies the cleansing of the body from the filth not visible to the eyes. During the *ātura,* most of the women interviewed completed one to five baths before touching objects in their house. This is how Harijan Basti interviewee Raji portrays the procedure following childbirth:[493]

> When one gets baby one takes bath on the seventh day (after the childbirth). Then one takes a bath on the twelfth day and again on the twenty-first. Everyone takes a water bath. On the eighth day, four or five of us (family members) take a bath. (Even) after that one does not touch the pots and pans used in cooking. On the twenty-first day colour is smeared on the head, and all the fabrics and quilts in the house are cleaned.[494] Everything is cleaned and water of the Ganges is sprinkled in the house. Then one goes to take a bath, drinks the water of the Ganges, and from then on one can touch everything.

Raji's quote of demonstrates the way the whole family was involved in the process of cleansing. Family members accompanied Raji to take baths and supported her in following the purity restrictions. When closing the *ātura,* the house was cleaned and sprinkled with the water of the Ganges. Then, after bathing and drinking holy water Raji was restored to ordinary life.

[492] Fieldwork diary, 28 October 2003.

[493] Raji was interviewed in Harijan Basti on 5 February 2004.

[494] By colour Raji means turmeric (*haluda*) paste that was often smeared on the head and body of people performing certain rituals. The smearing of *haluda* is also reported by Uusikylä as part of the ritual bathing after the delivery (Uusikylä 2000, 171).

### 5.2.3 Celebrating the mother and newborn

#### Feasts ending the impurity

Many interviewees explained that mothers gradually take more liberties in moving about and socializing with other people towards the end of the period of *ātura*.[495] Until *ātura* has ended, however, they neither conduct house *pūjās* nor enter the kitchen – if possible. The official ending of the isolation was in most families marked by rites and a ceremony that conformed to the customs of the family and community. According to ancient Sanskrit Hindu tradition, the birth ceremony of ending the impurity is called Jātakarma. It is likely that the birth rituals performed by the studied women had their origin in that ancient rite. Jātakarma saṃskāra was initially performed before the severing of the navel cord, but later it has been observed at the closing of the period of ceremonial impurity. By observing the rite, it is believed that the family ensures the intelligence and long life of the child.[496]

In Harijan Basti the birth ritual of ending the impurity was called the Day of Twenty-first (Ekuśa dina), in Ganti the day was marked by Ṣaṣṭhī pūjā either on the twenty-first day or one month after the birth.[497] In Janbazar, most families usually celebrated Chhaṭhihar pūjā, on the twelfth day after the childbirth.[498] The timing of the celebration varied greatly between families, which may indicate that people had very specific family customs or that they wanted to avoid inauspicious days, or that they were not strict in following the regulations concerning timing of the feast. Women's descriptions of the celebration show that the ending of the impurity was a time of great joy and happiness in the family. According to Harijan Basti interviewee Raji, the celebration of the Twenty-first is a grand feast:[499]

> We celebrate the Twenty-first day (Ekuśa dina). There is a bath and celebration. It is a big celebration. One gives *pūjā* to god. The child's and my nails are cut and we also cut the hair of the baby. If we were wearing jewellery during the delivery, we throw that away. Everyone is wearing new jewellery, a new sari and blouse.

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[495] Among Uusikylä's informants, it was thought that the major birth pollution started to decrease when the umbilical cord had dried and dropped off (Uusikylä 2000, 179).

[496] Pandey 1994, 74–76.

[497] In some Bengali families it is customary to celebrate Chaya Ṣaṣṭhī brata on the sixth day after the birth of a baby. The night of Chaya Ṣaṣṭhī is believed to be a time when the infant's fate is decided. According to Basak, "the ritual is observed in the evening and a maternal uncle or some relative must be present to hear the fate. Also somebody has to stay awake the whole night in the room where the mother sleeps with the baby" (Basak 2006, 219).

[498] Uusikylä refers to birth rituals marking the ending of isolation among Mayapara Muslims as *chatti* or *chatti onusthan* (the correct Bengali spelling would be *chhaṭhi* and *chhaṭhi anuṣṭhāna*). Bangladeshi Hindus called the ritual the Day of Ṣaṣṭhī (Ṣaṣṭhī dina) (Uusikylä 2000, 178, 183). Jeffery & al. distinguish between the Muslim *chattī* and the Hindu jasthawn, a purifying bath taken for the removal of defilement. In addition, *chattī* and jasthawn are thought to be "components of *khushī* (celebration, merriment, happiness) that welcomes the new baby and endorses motherhood and childbearing" (Jeffery & al. 1989, 132–134).

[499] Raji was interviewed in Harijan Basti on 5 February 2004.

Some Harijan Basti interviewees mentioned that their families invited many guests on the Twenty-first day and served them with an abundant meal, whereas other families either could not afford it or were not accustomed to organizing such a big feast. Similar to *sādha* (the celebration fulfilling the longings of the pregnant mother) the first-born child, particularly the first son, was usually given a more elaborate celebration than the following ones.[500] Harijan Basti interviewee Reha said that she did not have much of a feast for her younger son:[501]

> When my eldest son was twenty-one days old, we had a celebration. But with the youngest one we did not, because we did not have the money. However, on the Twenty-first day I took a bath and dressed the child and myself in new clothes. But I could not feed any guests. At the time of my eldest son, my parents were still alive and they arranged all this.

Some families invited a Brahman priest to give *pūjā* on behalf of the family at the ending of the *ātura*. People believed that a *pūjā* offered by a Brahman was especially favourable for a deity. For many, it was also done to fulfil the *mānasika* made for the sake of a child. It compensated for the debt caused by having the wish granted. Inviting a Brahman was also considered as a sign of the wealth and decency of the family, since a Brahman was often paid well for his contribution. Most of those who could afford a Brahman were in favour of using their services.

In Janbazar the birth ritual of Chhaṭṭihar pūjā was traditionally the time when a father would see the child for the first time. This is how Janbazar interviewee Tili explained the practice and significance of the feast:[502]

> Chhaṭṭihar pūjā is performed twelve days after the childbirth. It is to mark the occasion of the end of lying in the room. The father of the child is forbidden to see the child for the first twelve days. The father is forbidden to see the child for the duration decreed by the *paṇḍita*.[503] The father is first introduced to the child after seeing the image of the child in the oil kept in a pot.

The custom that Tili describes is nowadays rarely followed in the city environment. The total segregation of the father from the newborn is neither convenient nor possible. Following the custom is feasible only if the mother is sent to her native village for the delivery. Despite the changes, Chhaṭṭihar pūjā was, according to my Janbazari interviewees, still considered as the first official introduction of a child to his or her father. In the fieldwork area of Uusikylä, fathers

[500] Both Jeffery & al. and Uusikylä came to the same conclusion (Jeffery & al. 1989, 142–144; Uusikylä 2000, 183). The preference of males in postnatal celebrations is discussed also by Croll 2002, 102–103.

[501] Reha was interviewed in Harijan Basti on 18 March 2004.

[502] Tili was interviewed at Unni's house in Janbazar on 20 March 2004.

[503] A *paṇḍita* is a Hindu scholar, teacher, or philosopher specializing in the Sanskrit language and tradition. A *paṇḍita* is often invited to chant Vedic hymns at religious feasts. It is not rare that *paṇḍitas* function also as priests, or vica versa, the temple priests function as the *paṇḍita* (Bowker 1997, 729).

were not supposed to touch the baby before the birth rituals.[504] Birth pollution was regarded as highly dangerous for men, but there was also a fear of the father carrying bad qualities with him.

According to some of the Janbazar interviewees, people did not perform Chhaṭhihar pūjā if the newborn was a girl. There was a feast for girls as well, though notably more modest and without *pūjā*. For the son, however, some families arranged an elaborate celebration with a substantial meal and gifts. Among Janbazari families it was customary for a family to invite seven women – relatives and neighbours – to perform the main *pūjā*. The giving of offerings was not directed to any one deity; each family appeased their particular deity. During the feast, women drew vermilion on the hairparting (*sindūra*) of the mother, which was meant to mark the ending of her confinement and to integrate the mother once again into the community. The *sindūra* was drawn in a special way starting from the top of the nose. This, according to my interviewees, was a sign of great happiness and joy. While offering the *pūjā* for the family deity, the seven women prayed together for the safety of the baby, and that he would be granted all the good blessings. As part of the celebration, the women sang devotional songs to express their joy and to ask for protection for the child.[505]

As mentioned earlier, Bengali women who wished for a child prayed to Mā Ṣaṣṭhī, the goddess of fertility and children. Some of my Ganti interviewees were confident they had been granted their children through Mā Ṣaṣṭhī. Their birth celebration and the *pūjā* ending the impurity was hence directed to Mā Ṣaṣṭhī.[506] Even if Janbazari interviewee Sumi did not perform the rituals herself, she, being of Bengal community, had participated in the *pūjā* of Mā Ṣaṣṭhī on the twenty-first day and described the feast as follows:[507]

> We have a Ṣaṣṭhī pūjā on the twenty-first day (after the birth of a child). When we have Ṣaṣṭhī day, Mā Ṣaṣṭhī comes in. We say that she is sitting here as an earthen water jar

[504] Uusikylä 2000, 178.

[505] Fieldwork diary, 10–11 January 2008.

[506] In her study on birth rituals in Bangladesh, Blanchet mentions two interconnected birth celebrations of Shora-Ṣaṣṭhī and the Day of the Thirty-first. According to Blanchet, the Shoraṣaṣṭhī celebration is part of women's lore whereas the Thirty-first is an occasion of more formal celebration, elaborate rituals, and final purification. Shora-Ṣaṣṭhī is performed at night time on the sixth day after the birth. It is believed that Shoraṣaṣṭhī is a time when the goddess writes the name and main outline of the child's future. For this, a notebook with a lamp, ink, and pen are left at the entrance of the delivery room. The writing, it is believed, lasts the whole night, and no one in the house should sleep. While she is writing, the goddess needs to be kept happy and is thus brought favourable offerings (Blanchet 1984, 108). In the Muslim community studied by Uusikylä, it was also believed that the fate of a child was written on the sixth day after the birth, not by Shoraṣaṣṭhī, but by Allah (Uusikylä 2000, 185).

Among Blanchet's informants, the celebration on the Thirty-first day is performed only after the last purification rite on the thirtieth, during which the mother is bathed naked by a Brahman. The clothes the mother has worn during the isolation are washed and burned, and the household is thoroughly cleaned. In the morning of the Thirty-first a *pūjā* is performed by feeding the mother and child with purifying substances of cow. This is believed to mark the final end of pollution. Mother and child are given new clothes to wear and everyone is allowed to hold the child for the first time. A reception usually follows (Blanchet 1984, 108–110).

[507] Sumi was interviewed at her home in Janbazar on 11 February 2004.

> (*ghaṭa*) and we give *pūjā* to her.[508] We give her sugar cake. […] At Ṣaṣṭhī we have puffed rice (*khoi*) and sweets (*muṛki* and *laḍḍu*).[509] At Ṣaṣṭhī pūjā you have to invite five children and feed them with sweets. This means that we give children food first offered to the deity (*prasāda*). For the occasion the (newborn) child wears a new shirt and the mother new clothes.

The celebration of Ṣaṣṭhī pūjā among my Ganti interviewees had much in common with Sumi's description. Women prepared for Ṣaṣṭhī pūjā by fasting the whole day. In the evening relatives and neighbours were invited to the house where the feast was held, usually called the house of Ṣaṣṭhī (*Ṣaṣṭhī bāṛi*). My Ganti interviewees told that it was customary for guests to give the hosts sweets and puffed rice (*khoi*), which were offered to the goddess Ṣaṣṭhī as part of the *pūjā*. The goddess Ṣaṣṭhī herself was believed to be present in the form of a jar (*ghaṭa*), statue, or designs drawn on the floor or wall with rice paste (*ālpanā*). According to Maity, one common representation of Mā Ṣaṣṭhī at the birth rituals is a branch of a Banyan tree that is planted for ritual purposes. The tree symbolism of the goddess is also used in *ālpanās*, where Mā Ṣaṣṭhī is often represented as a Banyan tree bearing fruit on its branches.[510]

Some women maintained that one was obliged to perform the *pūjā* with a statue if one had made *mānasika* for the child.[511] Some invited a Brahman to conduct the *pūjā*. It was generally agreed that Ṣaṣṭhī pūjā was performed for both a baby daughter and son – although the timing varied according to the sex of a child. After the *pūjā,* people drew a red mark (*ṭikā*) on the forehead of the child and wished the baby well. Afterwards they distributed the gifts given to the deity (*prasāda*) to everyone and had a meal. Some mentioned that on that day a child was considered to be a goddess her/himself. In any case, Ṣaṣṭhī pūjā was a time to glorify the child – not only the newborn but other children as well.

These quotes, among others, tell volumes about the feeling of relief and joy displayed at the celebration ending the period of impurity, and also about the value conferred on the child. The family has an offspring and the young daughter-in-law has proved to be fruitful soil. Becoming a mother immediately raises her status in the hierarchy of the family.

### Naming, first outing, and feeding of the newborn

In all three neighbourhoods the newborns were given a variety of nicknames and terms of endearment by the family members and relatives. One of the nicknames often continued to be

[508] Maity also mentions the earthen pot and earthen image as the representative of Ṣaṣṭhī at the rituals celebrated after childbirth (Maity 1989, 69).

[509] *Khoi* is flattened, puffed rice used as an ingredient in a variety of Bengali snacks. *Muṛki* is a sweetmeat made of parched paddy coated with boiled sugar or molasses, and *laḍḍu* a sweet drop made of flour and sugar with other ingredients that vary by recipe (Biswas 2000).

[510] Maity 1989, 186.

[511] Fieldwork diary, 12 January 2008.

used later on as well. Children were also given official names, the selection of which applied a number of methods. One of the most common methods for choosing a name in Hindu communities is to consider the astral constellation or the month in which the child is born. Each constellation and month has names related to it.[512] The families of my interviewees, however, did not consult an astrologer for name-giving; instead, the common practice in all three communities was to name the child according to a family deity or other favourite deity, or to give a name suggestive of one's community. In a few cases, the name of the child was a sort of modification of the parent's name. Names always carried a meaning. Popular names drew meaning from nature, from moods, hoped-for qualities, or expressions of a wish, for instance.[513] It was not rare that the child was named after someone respected and admired by the family members. At present, it is common to name a child after a famous movie actor or actress. According to Pandey, children in India are occasionally given awkward – even repulsive – names, which are to frighten away evil spirits, disease, and death. A repulsive name may be given also to show that the (girl) child is unwanted.[514] I did not come across such names in my fieldwork areas.

The Gṛhyasūtras, the householder's ritual manuals, introduce a name-giving ceremony, Nāmakaraṇa, to be performed after the expiry of the impurity caused by birth. According to Pandey, the rite as a separate occasion has more or less lost its significance in the course of time and nowadays it usually coincides with other more popular birth ceremonies.[515] None of the interviewees mentioned a distinct feast or *pūjā* for the name-giving. In most families the timing depended on the older male members' decision, possibly during the birth rites of the Twenty-first (Ekuśa dina), Ṣaṣṭhī, or Chhaṭhihar pūjā. Some families celebrated the name-giving as part of the first feeding ceremony (Annaprāśana).

The policy of name-giving among the studied families varied a great deal. Only one mother out of thirty-two had named her daughter herself. The decision in most families was left in the hands of the father, grandfather, or uncle. Some families also considered the opinion of the grandmother. A few women maintained that women should not express their opinion about the name at all, but younger women claimed to have a voice in the decision-making process. Some families selected the name together, and anyone willing was given a chance to express his or her opinion. If there were several competing proposals, the family was likely to play a game to agree about the name. One typical game was to place oil lamps on a plate so that each lamp represented a proposal. Whichever lamp burned the longest would become the name of the child. Several families gave their children two separate names, each of which had a different use. The name usually called the god name (*debanāma*) was applied mainly in the context of a ritual performance and not much outside that, which the other name was for common use.

[512] Pandey 1994, 82.

[513] News published in Helsingin Sanomat on 23 October 2011 told about young women in India changing their repulsive names into ones carrying more positive meanings. The old names had expressed that they were unwanted (Helsingin Sanomat).

[514] Pandey 1994, 84.

[515] Pandey 1994, 84.

Another ancient postnatal *saṃskāra* – which was rarely practised in the three communities studied – is the first outing (Niṣkramaṇa) of the newborn. Only one Janbazari mother Unni referred to a similar custom:[516]

> Baby is taken out after the birth. If the husband is at home, then the baby is taken out after twelve or sixteen days, but if one (mother) is alone, she has to take the baby out.

The *saṃskāra* was originally (as described in the Gṛhyasūtras, Purāṇas, and Smṛti-literature) observed to seek protection for the child from life outside the house, which was believed to be full of natural and supernatural dangers. It was also a time to introduce the child to the grandeur of the universe. The procedure of the first outing given in the Gṛhyasūtras is simple and involves the father taking the child out and making the child look at the sun.[517] In the case of Unni, the time of the first outing coincided with Chhaṭṭihar pūjā. If there was more to the first outing than social significance, Unni did not refer to it.

If the name-giving and first outing were not celebrated extensively in my sample communities, the first feeding of rice (Annaprāśana) stood as a major landmark in the life of an infant, especially among the families of Ganti and Harijan Basti.[518] In Janbazar most women were aware of the custom: Some observed it and some followed a similar yet distinct custom of their family line. The Bengali-speaking community referred to the first feeding of rice as the celebration of Mukhebhāta.[519] The Oriyan community of Harijan Basti had adopted the name of the feast from Bengalis, and the majority of their families celebrated the occasion as Mukhebhāta.

According to the interviewees, Mukhebhāta occurred usually when the baby turned six or seven months old. Ganti interviewee Mila and Harijan Basti interviewee Pho give details about the timing of the feast as follows:[520]

> There is Mukhebhāta when the baby is six or seven months old. For boys, it is in even months and for girls in odd months. (Mila)

> When the baby is small we only feed him milk up to six months. When the baby is six months old, there is one feast called Mukhebhāta. (Pho)

In some families the timing of the feast was also connected to teething; the arrangements were made either before teething, or afterwards. Some argued that the child needs teeth to be able

[516] Unni was interviewed at her home in Janbazar on 6 January 2004.

[517] Pandey 1994, 86, 89.

[518] Parpola has studied the textual traditions of Annaprāśana, particularly of the Jaiminīya school (Parpola 1986).

[519] Mukhebhāta means literally 'rice in mouth'. Another common English translation of Mukhebhāta is 'the entry of grain' (Biswas 2000).

[520] Mila was interviewed in Ganti on 28 January 2004, and Pho in Harijan Basti on 4 March 2004.

to take solid food; for others, it did not matter. The common rule was that the celebration was to be organized in the child's paternal home before the child turned one year. In my fieldwork areas, the event of first feeding of solid food was usually celebrated by inviting the closest kin and a few neighbours for a joyous get-together. This is how Pho and Swara described Mukhebhāta:[521]

> We invite our neighbours and relatives and cook for the child. If the mother has a younger brother he will feed the baby. They bring a plate (*thāli*), lamp (*bāti*), and spoon from the maternal uncle's (*māmā*) house. The uncle puts a little rice pudding (*pāyasa*) in the baby's mouth. This is called Mukhebhāta. It means that from the next day onwards the baby can eat rice. (Pho)

> During the Mukhebhāta, the mother's brother (*māmā*) and father's elder brother's wife (*jeṭhāi*) feed the child rice. It is a big ceremony and usually the cook comes from outside. We send invitations. Relatives and friends give presents, like a shirt, ring, and some vessels. (Swara)

The previous quotes reveal the significance of the occasion for the majority of the families: a cheerful social function, the highlight of which is the maternal uncle feeding the baby its first solid food. If an uncle was not available, the duty was assumed by one of the father's female relatives. One of my interviewees said that "the first feeding is not a *pūjā,* instead it is a festival (*utsaba*)".[522] Even if it involved an offering of *pūjā*, the women seemed to think that it was not the main focus of the feast. When women described the details of the festivity, it became obvious that the main topics and concerns were the method used for preparing the rice pudding, the quality of the plate from which the rice pudding was fed, and the gifts the baby received. Many women acquired more expensive rice than usual. Some prepared the pudding in brass vessels, indicating the importance of the event. The feeding plate, which according to custom was brought by the maternal uncle, was carefully preserved after the ceremony as a reminder of the occasion. A range of expensive and in-expensive plate options were available, which families chose from according to their liking and economic standard.

Only a few interviewees mentioned the *pūjā* or rites involved in the first feeding ceremony. If possible, the family invited a Brahman to conduct the official *pūjās* and to enjoy the family's hospitality and gifts. The rice pudding and whatever food was prepared were first offered to the family deities, and then fed to the baby and guests as *prasāda*. These rites served general purposes, such as honouring the ancestors and receiving blessings for the well-being of the newborn and family.

An important part of the celebration was a playful game of picking up an item indicating the future of a child. People placed a selection of items on a plate, each representing an orienta-

[521] On Pho's interview, see the above footnote. Swara was interviewed in Ganti on 16 February 2004.

[522] I was told by several of my Bengali colleagues that among middle and upper class Bengali society, the occasion of Mukhebhāta was growing in size and elaborateness. Ever more lavish feasts of Mukhebhāta were celebrated at separate function halls where numerous guests were invited.

tion of life. A pen stood for learning, soil for property or agriculture, gold or money for wealth, and so on. The plate was then placed in front of the child, and whatever article the baby picked up first was said to represent his or her future.

## 5.3 Rituals and practices aiming at the well-being and protection of a child

### 5.3.1 *Pūjās* and *bratas*: worship for the well-being of a child

#### Ideal mother: a few general remarks on motherhood

While none of the women interviewed questioned the duty of being and becoming a mother at a young age and giving up personal interests such as education or career for the sake of family life, the scene among the younger generation appeared somewhat different. There were young women aged 15 to 22 in all three communities who preferred studying to married life and children. Education was the most important excuse – and often the only one – for young women to postpone their marriage. These young women's educational ambitions caused diverse reactions among their elders. On the one hand, parents and relatives saw education as a chance for a better life for them, but on the other hand, they were afraid of their daughters slipping away from their control – a state unimaginable for their own generation.[523]

The present tendency to postpone the marriage age had not, however, resulted in young women wanting to remain unmarried or childless. Motherhood was still understood as an unquestionable imperative. Being a mother was the model of womanhood that the past generations had introduced, and there was no need to question that. Girls were accustomed to take responsibility for babysitting their siblings and minors of the neighbourhood from very young age. Most of them were taught mothering skills by their female relatives and neighbours. With the support of the family, young mothers quickly learned to look after their newborns.

Most women emphasized the importance of taking good care of their children – no matter how difficult the conditions under which they lived. Harijan Basti interviewee Pho did not left no doubt about the priority of her life:[524]

> I really want to build a good future for my children. It is up to the blessing of Bhagavān if I can make everything good for them. This neighbourhood has improved a little. If the neighbourhood is bad, it is hard to raise children. But even then, if ladies take good care, children can grow up well. […] Even though we have to work really hard for that, we are willing. We have to work for our children. Children are everything for me. I do not have any other desire. […] My wishes are with my children. I do not have my own dreams. If the children are well, I am well.

[523] Fieldwork diary, 15 January 2008.

[524] Pho was interviewed in Harijan Basti on 4 March 2004.

Pho admitted that raising children in minimal facilities was difficult. However, she was willing to work hard to make a good environment for her children. She believed it was possible if she took good care of them, and she turned to God (Bhagavān), whom she believed could bless her with skills needed to do this. Pho claimed that she did not have her own desires outside her children. In fact, she seems not only to portray herself, but an ideal mother in general. The above quote is an apt description of the ideal mother-child relationship. Being a verbally talented woman Pho knew the genre of ideal-mother-talk unique to the Bengali language. Namely, Bengali is rich in expressions glorifying motherly affection, praising the mother's sacrificial love, and describing the fondness of the mother-child tie. In introducing her ideas about motherhood, she was expressing what was expected of the ideal mother.

It is typical for the Indian mother to create a close bond especially with her eldest son, who represents a secure future for her. Because of arranged marriages it is also possible that the first son is her 'first love', the object of her profound affection. According to my observations, maternal affection was shown in my fieldwork areas to both girls and boys. However, the obvious preference of the male child was revealed in many ways. For instance, when I enquired how many children a mother had, she always reported the sons first, sometimes not even mentioning the daughters. The male child was also readily taken for a check-up in case of illness, whereas his sister was often nursed at home. In most families the sons were given priority in schooling, whereas daughters were expected to assist in domestic duties from a very young age.

As was revealed by some of the older interviewees, these dear sons did not, however, necessarily meet their mothers' expectations. Some were disappointed with their adult sons, who were not taking sufficient care of their aging mothers. They complained about them coming to ask for money instead of bringing in income themselves. Some of these women concluded that it was actually better to have daughters since they were more likely to remain faithful to their parents.

In traditional Indian society bringing up a child was the joint responsibility of several family members. To certain extent this mode of living still prevails, but in modern urban contexts the increasingly common way to live is in the nuclear family – as was the case among my research sites. This arrangement naturally added to the workload of women. Middle and upper class women managed the situation by hiring maids to do the household chores, but in my fieldwork areas, women not only took care of children and domestic chores, but many of them also worked for wages. The heavy work load certainly affected the time and quality of mothering. In the hope of making life good for their children, many turned to gods and observed vows and rituals they believed were beneficial for their offspring.

Recurrent worship and fasting on behalf of a child

Most interviewees believed that the well-being of children (as well as the whole family) was first and foremost bound up with the family's allegiance to regular and devoted conduct of religious obligations, and they followed several distinct yet connected ritual cycles simultaneously. In addition to domestic *pūjās*, which were usually performed twice a day at dawn and nightfall, the majority of the women observed fasts (*bratas*) and *pūjās* on a weekly, monthly, and annual basis. Certain days of the week and month were also dedicated to rituals and fasts. Each weekday was named after a celestial object such as the sun, moon, or a planet, and indicated the worship of a particular deity or deities. In a similar vein, the monthly and annual ritual cycles followed the astrological calendar (*pañjikā*), in which the position of the celestial objects indicated the auspicious days for fasts and *pūjās.*

Some weekday-related *pūjās* were performed only in certain months, or in connection to major religious feasts. For example, some women of Janbazar observed four distinct Itvar (Sunday) pūjās during the year as a continuation of their major feast, Chhaṭḥa pūjā. In Harijan Basti women performed special *pūjās* on four consecutive Tuesdays in the month of Āśbina (from the middle of September to the middle of October) before their major feast of Mā Śītalā pūjā, and in the same manner, the devotees of Santoṣī Mā observed fasts on sixteen consecutive Fridays to celebrate the final Santoṣī Mā brata. Even if women could not read the calendar, many of them were aware of the auspicious time for each ritual.

The table below displays the way my informants connected the weekdays with celestial objects and deities. The table introduces only those deities that they mentioned:

Table 2: Celestial objects and deities and their special days of the week

| *Weekday* | *Celestial object* | *Deity* |
|---|---|---|
| | | |
| Monday | moon | Santoṣī Mā |
| Tuesday | Mars | Śītalā Mā, Mā Kālī, Mā Tāriṇī, Maṅgalcaṇḍī |
| Wednesday | Mercury | |
| Thursday | Jupiter | Lakṣmī |
| Friday | Venus | Santoṣī Mā |
| Saturday | Saturn | The great gods (*baṛo ṭhākura*); Śiva, Nārāyaṇa, Śani, Mā Kālī |
| Sunday | sun | Itvar, sun god/dess |

Since fasting was required as a prerequisite for the performance of most rituals and feasts, women living in my fieldwork areas adhered regularly to a fast or reduced diet at least once a week, occasionally even four days a week. Most women in Ganti and Harijan Basti fasted regularly on Saturdays and Tuesdays (*Śani-Maṅgalbāre*); in Janbazar the situation was more varied. Each week was divided into days when the consumption of meat or fish was allowed and days when

women fasted, ate only vegetarian food (*nirāmiṣa*), or prepared only those dishes favourable to the deity.[525] In practice, most families in the fieldwork areas could not afford meat or fish more than once a week, or not even then. Some women were very strict in obeying the rules of right ritual conduct and diet whereas others admitted openly that they were slipping from them. Some admitted that fasting was too demanding and they had abandoned observing it. Yet, they advised younger women in their family to abide by the fasts. The following quotes provide examples of the weekly dietary restrictions women observed:[526]

> I go on a fast (*brata*) on Sundays, another (fast) on Tuesdays, and one on Fridays. I pray to god on Sundays (Itvar). I also pray on Saturdays. I eat *kheer* on Saturdays and Sundays.[527] […] Every month I have to have two fasts, four Itvars and two Maṅgalbārs.[528] One is during the full moon. We go to Sonpur (in Bihar) to visit a temple there and offer *pūjās* after bathing in the Ganges. (Anga)

> We eat fish and meat three days a week and vegetarian (*nirāmiṣa*) four days a week. That is because of the *pūjās* for the gods. We eat vegetarian food on Thursdays, Tuesdays, Mondays and Saturdays. (Pho)

Dietary restrictions such as abstaining from non-vegetarian food, was considered as part of the purification required for the successful performance of rituals. As already mentioned, purity was believed to be established by bathing, fasting, and obeying restrictions such as abstaining from sexual contact and touching things considered impure. One was also supposed to cleanse oneself after the monthly periods, to stay calm, and to avoid socializing with others. Observing the weekday-based, monthly, and annual rites was not only time-consuming but required a great deal of discipline, knowledge, and investment on the part of the devotees.

Some interviewees admitted that there was a certain social pressure for women to adhere to ritual conduct for the well-being of their children and family. Those not conducting rites were looked down on by others, and thought of as failures. The usual excuses for not conducting the rites

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[525] Outside the recurrent fasts and dietary restrictions related to ritual conduct, most members of the three communities enjoyed a mixed food diet. Only one interviewee out of thirty-two followed a strict vegetarian diet, a principle deriving from the Vaiṣṇava devotion she was involved with. Food items, similar to other objects within the Hindu tradition, are ranked according to their purity. They are generally categorized as *sāttvika, rājasika,* or *tamosika. Sāttvika* food is thought to be the purest and includes fruit, vegetables, cereals, pulses, nuts, and dairy products like milk and butter. *Rājasika* items comprise very hot, sour, spicy, bitter, and dry substances. *Tamosika* food is stale, juiceless, half-cooked, rotting, and impure such as meat and intoxicants. The food one consumes is believed to produce qualities accordingly, *sāttvaguṇa, rajōguṇa,* and *tamoguṇa.* The *sāttvika* diet is thought to promote longevity, intellect, peace of mind, and non-violence; *rājasika* to create feelings such as passion and tension; and *tamosika* to lead a person to evil deeds, to give rise to disease, laziness, and other evil qualities (Vatuk 1979, 72–73). Even if my interviewees did not refer to this terminology, they confirmed the principles of the ideology in practice. Namely, during fasts they adhered to dietary restrictions that actually followed the general categorization of pure and impure food items.

[526] Anga was interviewed in Janbazar on 4 December 2003, and Pho in Harijan Basti on 4 March 2004.

[527] *Kheer* is a sweet dish prepared from rice, milk, and sugar, and flavoured usually with raisins, cardamom, almonds, and cashewnuts. *Kheer* is what Bengalis call *pāyasa.*

[528] The name of the fast is given according to the weekday. Itvar means Sunday and Maṅgalbār Tuesday.

were lack of knowledge and time. In practice, some families could not afford to perform all the rites they wanted to and some were not allowed to do so because of widowhood. Here Harijan Basti interviewee Paki justifies not following religious observances:[529]

> I cannot go to the temple. I do not take baths at the moment. I do not want to. I have finished doing it. My daughter-in-law does it. She is at the moment fasting for the well-being of the children and for the success of her husband. I cannot do the *pūjās*, I do not know how to do them. I have done only the ones that someone told me how to do. Since I go to work I cannot do them. I quit doing them after my husband died.

Most of the women who regularly adhered to the rites, found the practices meaningful for them and were proud of being able to carry out their religious duties. They were expected to do so, but at the same time they believed that religious observances were their way to have an influence. None of the interviewees admitted that they were following the rites against their own will. Some gave reasons for their ritual conduct:[530]

> All I think of while performing the *pūjās* is that my children will have peace. What god has destined will happen. I have three sons. They are with me. I do the *pūjās* as a habit so that my household is blessed, and for my children's well-being. I pray to god for all these. I do not do any fasts (*bratas*) for myself. (Unni)

> I give *mānata* so my children will stay healthy, so there will be no suffering or disaster. For the well-being of the children, that is why I am fasting and pouring water on Śiva god. (Banu)

> I do not fast (*uposa*) since I am working. My daughter-in-law does. She fast for Lakṣmī and the big gods. On Saturdays she does *pūjā* and fasts for god Nārāyaṇa. […] We help her to do the *pūjās*. […] My son could never fast. […] Young women do the fasting. Why should we suffer anymore? If we do not get rice, we cannot do anything. […] We do the fasts for the well-being and happiness of the family, for the advancement of the family so that we would stay well. […] so there would not be any unrest. We do it especially for the happiness and peace of the children.[531] (Bu)

> Earlier my mother-in-law did Kālī pūjā. She knows all this. […] Now my mother-in-law has become old and she cannot do it anymore. Me and my husband, we do it. He helps me to do it. It gives me peace of mind and I do it mainly for my son. […] I also do it for my husband. There is no *pūjā* for oneself. (Ru)

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[529] Paki was interviewed in Harijan Basti on 9 February 2004.

[530] Unni was interviewed in Janbazar on 6 January 2004, Banu in Harijan Basti on 10 March 2004, Bu in Ganti on 1 March 2004, and Ru in Harijan Basti on 2 December 2003.

[531] Bu's quote throws light on the hierarchy of women within a family and the bond that exists between members of the same household. Bu had given up fasting because of the hardship it caused. The religious responsibility was then left to her daughter-in-law. Bu's family was convinced that they all were drawing benefits from the devotion and fasts that the daughter-in-law adhered to. In fact, Bu said "*we* do the fasts for the well-being… *we*…" The daughter-in-law was abiding by the rites on behalf of the rest of the family.

The above quotes accord well with the general reasoning underlying the performance of the recurrent rituals. Apart from contributing to the well-being of children and family, many women said that performing the rituals regularly gave them peace of mind. It was agreed that a decent mother and wife would not adhere to the rituals for the sake of purely personal desires. Many of them maintained that there was no fast for oneself. However, performing rites made sense and was important for most women.[532]

There is no denying that to a certain extent women's ritual conduct confirmed male superiority. Ritual narratives have patriarchal discourse, which is clearly shown in the women's ritual stories (*Meyedera Bratakathā*), for instance. Rituals are first and foremost performed for the well-being of husbands and sons, and conducting them require obeisance to the various restrictions which narrow the living space of women. Despite the inconveniences involved, women however maintained that conducting rituals increased their selfconfidence and selfempowerment. They also enjoyed the respect of family members for their fidelity in carrying out their religious duties.

Chhaṭḥa pūjā: praying to the sun goddess

Most interviewees believed that their fidelity and exertion in observing the fasts and rites would materialize in blessings and a fortunate life for their offspring. As part of their annual ritual cycle many of the interviewees celebrated religious feasts that were thought to be particularly beneficial for children. One these was Chhaṭḥa pūjā. If there was any wish or requirement concerning children, Janbazari interviewees suggested that one should take up performing Chhaṭḥa pūjā. The feast was primarily, but not exclusively, carried out by married women.

According to Singh, the celebration of Chhaṭḥa pūjā was originally a regional Bihari festival, but Bihari migrants, similar to Chamars of Janbazar, have transplanted the feast among people in the metropolitan cities of India.[533] The celebration of Chhaṭḥa pūjā outside the Bihari community was also growing in popularity in Kolkata. For example, in Harijan Basti, some women confirmed that they or others they knew had been performing Chhaṭḥa pūjā. Some complained about the complexity of this particular pūjā; none of the Harijan Basti interviewees were aware of the origin of the feast, but had simply carried it out with the instruction of family members or community friends. Some of the Ganti interviewees had heard of the feast, but had neither observed it nor knew the details about it.

For Janbazari interviewees, adhering to the Chhaṭḥa pūjā to the full meant conducting the main feast as well as a group of *bratas,* which were then observed throughout the year. When the interviewees spoke about the Chhaṭḥa pūjā, they actually referred to the Dala Chhaṭḥa, which was

[532] Pearson came to the same conclusion in her study on *vratas* (Pearson 1996, 193).

[533] Singh 2010.

the main Chhaṭḥa feast celebrated in the bright half of the Kārtika month.[534] Some said that the Chhaṭḥa pūjās were done for the reverence of goddess Chhaṭḥa, others maintained that the feast is not necessarily directed to any particular deity.[535] Offerings were usually lifted towards the sun, but they could be addressed to other deities as well.[536] Many said that during the Chhaṭḥa pūjā the sun is considered a deity and called Sūrya (sun) god.[537] The Chhaṭḥa pūjā was also categorized as one of the many Sūrya pūjās which included a cluster of sun-related observances other than Chhaṭḥa. Singh characterizes the Chhaṭḥa pūjā as a "thanksgiving festival dedicated to the sun god in the form of mother" (Singh 2010). The feast, according to Singh, is also widely called Sūrya Ṣaṣṭhī, which refers to the timing (the sixth) of the feast but also the feminine aspect of the sun deity. In the communities that Singh studied, offerings were given to Chhaṭḥi Mai, a goddess praised by devotional songs sung by the devotees during the feast. None of my interviewees, however, mentioned Chhaṭḥi Mai. Her worship was not part of their tradition.

[534] The main Chhaṭḥa rituals are usually performed at *śukla ṣaṣṭhī* (sixth day of the bright half) of the month of Kartikā (from the middle of October to the middle of November) (Pearson 1996, 235–236; Singh 2010). This indicates the connection between the Chhaṭḥa pūjā and Ṣaṣṭhī worship. *Dala* refers here to a kind of bamboo-made-basket, tray, or winnowing fan, in which all the items required for the *pūjā* are arranged.

[535] Fieldwork diary, 28 October 2003.

[536] One important sun-god of the Bengalis is Itu, but my interviewees did not refer to the connection between Itu and Chhaṭḥa pūjā. To which deity the offerings were given depended on the place where the particular ritual was held. By the river, offerings were lifted towards the sun, but in rituals performed at home, offerings were usually given to the family deity.

[537] The worship of the sun god as a fasting ritual and festival is described in the *Mahābhārata* (3.16.31). Many believe that the Chhaṭḥa pūjā is a derivative of that, but there is no evidence of a link between the ancient sun worship cult and present Chhaṭḥa pūjā, even if the purpose of both is the fertility and prosperity of the family (Singh 2010). According to Pathak & Humes, fertility practices such as sun worship together with water offerings existed in the remote past but were later adopted by the Brahmanical tradition (Pathak & Humes 1993, 212).

Figure 17: Women with the offerings during Chhaṭḥa pūjā

Most interviewees had engaged in the observance of Chhaṭḥa pūjā after marriage when they prayed for a child, or after they had given birth to their first-born. Their husband's relatives, most commonly their mother-in-law, had usually encouraged them to begin the Chhaṭḥa bratas. It was

also conducted as a fulfilment of one's promise.[538] According to the general rule of Chhaṭḥa pūjā, the rites were to be performed every year. In principle, the only excuse for not observing them was a family member's death. In practice, however, families often skipped Chhaṭḥa rituals because they lacked the resources for purchasing all the necessary items.

According to the interviewees, Chhaṭḥa pūjā required long and careful preparations, which comprised collecting the supplies necessary for the performance of the rituals, organizing the logistics and space for the performance, and finally, of preparing to fast. According to Basak, the day before the rituals was the time for children to build a small altar, the belief being that the sun would rule his kingdom from there.[539] Also, a restricted diet began the day before the proper fast; it usually consisted of milled rice of sun-dried paddy (*ātapcāla*), lentils, and simple vegetables. The actual fast was begun only after the ritual bathing. This is how Janbazar interviewee Praba describes the fasting practices of Chhaṭḥa:[540]

> During Chhaṭḥa pūjā we fast for two days.[541] The first day of the fast is called Kharna.[542] At night we purify and clean the house, then take out the utensils especially meant for the *pūjā*. The cooking is done in brass utensils. We construct an oven by placing bricks on each other and putting mud over them, to hold them in place. […] We cook *pāyasa* and *paroṭā* (flatbread of whole-wheat flour) with *ghi* (clarified butter). These along with fruit are offered to the god. […] No other person is allowed in the room. Only the person who is fasting does the cooking. One breaks the fast there and also takes milk and fruit there. The next day the fast extends throughout the whole day and night.

The Kharna, according to Praba, was named after the special *pūjā* at dusk during which votaries offered their food preparations to the deity. The fast usually continued until midnight, when the worshipper enjoyed a meal consisting of the offerings (*prasāda*) earlier given to the god. A votary was only allowed to have *prasāda.* Praba emphasized the importance of eating the food behind closed doors so that the worshipper was walled off from outside sounds. For the next one and a half days, the fasting went on without even a sip of water. During the fieldwork I was able to spend some time with women carrying out the fast of Chhaṭḥa pūjā. I asked if they found fasting demanding or difficult. Janbazar interviewee Unni, who seemed

[538] One of the interviewees mentioned a ritual of filling up a *kosi,* which according to Singh, is usually performed by mothers whose specific wishes have been fulfilled. *Kosi* refers to an earthen elephant with oil lamps on top of it. In Singh's description of the ritual, twenty-one oil lamps and another fourteen open lamps are placed on the elephant's back. The oil lamps are lit and the open ones are filled with germinated gram or fruit. Later the *kosi* is immersed in sacred water (Singh 2010).

[539] Basak 2006, 156.

[540] Praba was interviewed in Janbazar on 11 February and 5 March 2004.

[541] There are various traditions concerning the celebration of Chhaṭḥa pūjā. According to Singh, the rituals can spread over four days, including initiation and completion (Singh 2010).

[542] Kharna refers to the special ritual that is to be performed in the evening after sunset. This rite is usually performed on the second day of the Chhaṭḥa pūjās (Singh 2010).

exhausted, argued that fasting gave her enormous, inexplicable powers. She maintained that because of her self discipline she was capable of anything.

Figure 18: The main rituals of Chhaṭḥa pūjā take place at the river.

Kharna was followed by the main day of Chhaṭḥa pūjā. Women busily collected all the items required for the *pūjā* to be offered by the river Ganges at nightfall. Traditionally the *dala* with a variety of fruit, clusters of bananas, a selection of food preparations, earthen lamps, incense was carried to the river on the head of the votary. Since the river was located a short distant from the living quarters of Janbazar and the *dalas* were filled with abundant offerings, they were packed on the platform of a lorry and driven to the river. The lorry ride was arranged by the women's husbands, who accompanied them to the river. The events by the river formed the climax of the whole celebration. Praba continues her description of the feast as follows:

> In the evening we visit the bathing terrace by the river (*ghāṭa*) with fruit and flowers as offerings, and we also bathe in the river Ganges. We arrange all the fruit in the *dala;* plantains, coconut, and so on. […] We also give clusters of bananas as offerings. […] Then after returning home, we retire to bed early. We rise very early the next morning, before sunrise, and return to the bathing terrace. As the sun rises, we offer prayers to the sun god. On returning home, we break the fast.

I was able to accompany women to the river as they carried out one of the main rituals of Chhaṭḥa pūjā at nightfall on the second day. Most of the family members had arrived at the river to witness the rituals and also to assist the women in offering gifts to the sun god. They placed the tray with offerings by the riverside, lit the oil lamps and incense, and sprinkled water of the Ganges on the tray. Then they bathed facing the setting sun and lifted the tray and other offerings towards the sun. As the sun set the women prayed standing in the river with their eyes closed and palms joined together in front of the chest to show respect (*pranāma*) to the sun. To mark the special celebration, they drew *sindūra* on each other from the tip of the nose up to the crown. Both female and male family members assisted in all the details of the performance and in receiving the blessings generated by the devoted worship. The families were convinced that they benefitted from a family member conducting the rites, as seen, for example, from the comment of Harijan Basti interviewee Sule:[543]

> My husband's younger brother does the Chhaṭḥa pūjā. We live in the same house, so it has also affected us. We care about that god a lot.

Observing Chhaṭḥa pūjā in the correct manner was demanding. Some women believed that any deviation from the rules could bring harmful and unwanted results. Praba continues her elaboration on Chhaṭḥa:

> The procedure for the observances of Chhaṭḥa is very rigid. Only the one fasting can touch the utensils. Neither she nor anyone else is permitted to cross over the offerings. She should clean the house thoroughly, including all bedclothes, all of which should be done only after bathing. Any deviation from this piety will only bring curses. Have you not seen albinos! Since they did not strictly observe the rules of the pūjā, they have been cursed. One must take care that the preparation of the food for the offerings should never be cooked in the same utensils as meat and fish preparations. Food preparations for offerings are prepared from clarified butter (*ghi*). Even the earthen lamps that are lit for this occasion require clarified butter.

Praba strongly insisted on purity regarding the observance of a ritual. Every detail was important and any violation of the rules was considered as potentially damaging. In order to be effective the ritual had to be performed in the correct manner. Besides general rules, each family adhered to the customs of their own line, some families more rigidly than others.

The observance of Chhaṭḥa pūjā was continued by carrying out *bratas* on certain Sundays (Itvar) throughout the year. Janbazar interviewee Unni explains the logic as follows:[544]

> It is five years since I first did Chhaṭḥa pūjā, but it is just now that I performed Itvar. The custom is that as soon as you perform the Chhaṭḥa pūjā you also have to do the required Itvar pūjās. I did not know that earlier. When people told me about it, I did them (Itvar

[543] Fieldwork diary, 31 December 2003. Sule was interviewed in Harijan Basti on 29 January 2004.

[544] Unni was interviewed in Janbazar on 6 January 2004.

> pūjās) too. They said it should be done. Having omitted Itvar pūjā last time I have performed it this time. […] Chhaṭha pūjā is performed in the month of Kārtika, so I choose one Sunday in Agrahāyaṇa and the other Sunday in the month of Pauṣa. I will do it on one Sunday in the month of Caitra. And the last will be on one Sunday in Baiśākha – so four Sundays in all.[545] This pūjā on Sundays is of the sun. Chhaṭha pūjā and Itvar pūjā are one and the same. Itvar is an answer to Chhaṭha pūjā. It is like answering a question. Itvar is a continuation of Chhaṭha pūjā. The sun god is continuation of the Chhaṭha pūjā. When you pose a question you always give an answer. Itvar pūjā is like an answer, Chhaṭha pūjā is like a question.

The conscientious conduct of Chhaṭha pūjā kept Unni occupied all year round. In her view, the Chhaṭha pūjā and Itvars were innerconnected so that one could not exist without the other. The observance of Itvars was done firstly to sustain the good effects following from the performance of Chhaṭha, and secondly, to prepare oneself for the forthcoming main Chhaṭha pūjā.

For the people of Janbazar Chhaṭha pūjā was a great social event in which most households participated. Women observed it both as individuals and as members of a group of devotees. Each woman did it for the sake of her own family, but at the same time shared the hardships and suffering with other women. Their fidelity, precision, and endurance in the conduct of the rites and fasting were highly valued. According to Singh, it is common to venerate the woman that has performed Chhaṭha pūjā as a goddess herself.[546] Performing Chhaṭha pūjā was also thought to bring greater respect and a better standing for the family when compared with those not performing the rite.

### Jiutiyā pūjā: tying threads for the protection of children

Another widely and passionately celebrated feast originating from the states north of West Bengal is Jiutiyā, 'a vow of the living son'.[547] According to Janbazar women, every mother in the Chamar community must observe Jiutiyā for the benefit of her children, especially for her sons. As distinct from Chhaṭha pūjā, Jiutiyā was performed exclusively for the sake of children, and not for other purposes. A devotee could, however, define a precise purpose for the performance of it – a safe delivery, for instance – but the goal had to be related to children.

The Jiutiyā brata was also well-known to most women of Harijan Basti, though they observed it more irregularly. Some had performed it only once or twice in their whole lifetime, particularly during pregnancy or right after getting married. Some had been encouraged to observe it

[545] The month of Kārtika lasts from the middle of October to the middle of November; Agrahāyaṇa from the middle of November to the middle of December; Pauṣa from the middle of December to the middle of January; Caitra is the last month of the Bengali year, from the middle of March to the middle of April; and Baiśākha lasts from the middle of April to the middle of May.

[546] Singh 2010.

[547] The feast is also commonly called Jīvitputrika, but I did not note my interviewees using that name.

by their in-laws when marriage negotiations were still under way. Only one Harijan Basti interviewee mentioned observing Jiutiyā every year.

Jiutiyā pūjā was typically a women's ritual; males neither followed, nor were needed to perform any part of the rites involved. It was conducted in the company of other women alone. Jiutiyā pūjā bore many similarities with Chhaṭḥa pūjā; it was done for the children; it included fasting; it was connected to the worship of the sun god; and the main *pūjā* was conducted on the banks of a river or pond (*ghāṭa*). Some women said that Chhaṭḥa and Jiutiyā were like two sisters who resembled each other.

There was no general agreement among my interviewees about the timing and the deity associated with Jiutiyā worship. Jiutiyā pūjā was most commonly held on the eighth day of the dark half of Āśbina month, but the months of Bhādra and Kārtika were also suggested.[548] In examining Jiutiyā more carefully, it occurred to me that Jiutiyā pūjās were not performed in consecutive autumn months, but that women celebrated it equally in the month of Āśbina. Most women did not know the calendar well. They simply remembered that Jiutiyā was held in the autumn season and suggested a month at random. For some, celebrating Jiutiyā did not involve fasting and giving of offerings to a distinct deity. Accoring to Praba:[549]

> There is no idol associated with Jiutiyā. It is only for praying for the well-being of the children and remembering the Almighty.

Many considered Jiutiyā Sūrya (sun) pūjā or Sūrya Nārāyaṇa pūjā, and lifted the offerings towards the sun. Some women used an earthen pot, which stood for the deity celebrated at Jiutiyā. According to Pearson, Jiutiyā brata is occasionally connected with the worship of goddess Lakṣmī, mainly because Jiutiyā falls on the last day of the sixteen-day Mahā-Lakṣmī brata.[550] Only one of the interviewees mentioned Jiutiyā Mā (Mother Jiutiyā), the goddess that, in the view of Pearson, is "clearly the personification of the Jīvitputrika brata" having no iconic form or other function apart from this *brata* (Pearson 1996, 165).[551]

The name of the feast comes from *jiutiyā,* a red or yellow thread that women wear on their necks and tie around the necks and arms of their children as a part of the Jiutiyā celebration.[552] The thread (*jiutiyā*) represents the protective power the devotee acquires by faithfully holding to the observance. In Janbazar most families tied golden or silver charms or rings onto the thread, a

[548] Āśbina month is from the middle of September to the middle of October, Bhādra from the middle of August to the middle of September, and Kārtika from the middle of October to the middle of November.

[549] Praba was interviewed in Janbazar on 11 February and 5 of March 2004.

[550] Pearson 1996, 165.

[551] The only description Pearson gives of the Jiutiyā Mā is that the deity is said to live in wells or other watery places such as springs, lakes, and rivers (Pearson 1996, 165).

[552] According to Pearson women wear the threads on their own necks during the Jiutiyā (Pearson 1996, 163). Most women in the research sites, however, tied the thread on their children's neck or arm.

custom that also bore a special significance. Praba and Unni explained the symbolism of the thread and charms as follows:[553]

> We tie *jiutiyās* on our children. […] In the ritual of Jiutiyā we prepare golden charms for the *pūjā*.[554] One item is prepared for each child, so we have had four of them; one for my daughter and three for my sons. The golden items are turned to Jiutiyās, since the *pūjā* is called Jiutiyā. The golden ones are for my sons and the silver one for my daughter. (Praba)

> Jiutiyā is made of gold. You get it at a goldsmith. They (charms) will be equal to the number of sons. (Unni)

*Jiutiyā* referred either to the bare thread or to the golden or silver charm tied to it, which was transformed into a protective object in the course of the ritual. For some, the *jiutiyā* itself represented the deity, while for others, the *jiutiyā* was an offering that was first given to the deity and then received as a gift and blessing of god (*prasāda*).[555] Either way, the threads were tied to defend the children from all possible misfortunes. Many people, such as Savi, were confident of its benefits:[556]

> I perform Jiutiyā for my children. By performing Jiutiyā it is said that one can overcome any impending danger to her children.

The procedure of Jiutiyā brata followed the same script as most one-day fasts of my informants. As mentioned, Janbazar interviewee Praba had decided to perform Jiutiyā brata after she had faced serious difficulties during her pregnancy. From then on she had recurrently observed Jiutiyā for several years, and described it as follows:

> During Jiutiyā one will not put anything into the mouth, except during bathing when one can gargle water. […] After purifying ourselves by bathing we prepare *mathiyas* (thin savoury deep fried crispy snacks) and offer prayer in the name of our children, with *mathiyas* as offerings. After the *pūjā,* the *mathiyas* and *mālapoyās* (type of dessert) are given to the children.[557] We observe fasting throughout the day. The fasting continues throughout the night also. We tie the *jiutiyās* on our children. […] We tie holy strings on the arms of our childen as a talisman.[558]

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[553] Praba was interviewed on 11 February and 5 March 2004, and Unni on 6 January 2004, both in Janbazar.

[554] By preparing charms Praba means that she herself strings the golden charms onto a thread.

[555] A similar idea about the use and function of the *jiutiyā* is reported by Pearson (Pearson 1996, 166).

[556] Savi was interviewed in Janbazar on 20 March 2004.

[557] *Mathiya* is originally a Gujarati snack prepared during Diwali (Dīpābali in Bengali), and *mālapoyā* is a saucer-shaped sweetmeat – originally an Oriyan dessert – made of flour or rice-powder fried in ghee or oil and then dipped in sugarjuice (Biswas 2000).

[558] Talisman is a term given by the translator.

The main *pūjā* of Jiutiyā brata is usually held on the the river banks.[559] Janbazari interviewees celebrated it in the same place as the Chhaṭḥa pūjā – on a site by the Hoogley river, which they thought was the river Ganges. Harijan Basti women who conducted Jiutiyā rituals performed them on the landing-stage of a nearby pond. Some named the particular *pūjā* Sūrya pūjā, because it usually involved an offering to the sun. Praba continued:

> We offer *pūjā* and bathe in the river Ganges. Then we take flowers, garlands, fruit, and an earthen pot, and offer our *pūjā*. […] The *pūjā* is offered by sprinkling water (of the Ganges) and giving flowers. […] We also light incense sticks and hold religious discourses. We return to our homes and fast through the night, then break the fast only in the morning of the following day.

The main *pūjā* of Jiutiyā is usually carried out with a group of women forming a circle next to the water. After purifying the area with Ganges water the women bundle up the offerings that they have brought. Everyone forms a pile of offerings in front of her – the size of the pile naturally revealing what a family can afford. According to Pearson, celebrating Jiutiyā pūjā in Benares required abundant offerings which included a variety of food, fruit, saris, and plastic toys.[560] My Janbazari interviewees did not emphasize the importance of bountiful offerings – at least no one brought it up. According to Harijan Basti informant Bali, the offerings consisted mainly of fruit such as apples, plantains, grapes, maize, coconut, betel nuts, and sour fruit.

After exposing the contents of their offerings by the river or pond, the women take handfuls of flowers and peridiocally throw them on top of their piles. This is thought to honour and please the deity. As part of the rituals some women recite stories (*kathā*) while others listen, and continue throwing flowers and sprinkling water. Afterwards, the women receive the offerings as a gift from god (*prasāda*) and carefully pack them to share them later with children and others. The *brata* procedure has a number of variations, which follow the tradition of each community and household. In Janbazar, women customarily listened to the local scholar (*paṇḍita*) recite the story of the *brata* instead of telling it on their own during the *pūjā*, a common practice among the Jiutiyā observants in general.[561]

The Jiutiyā feast appealed to mothers' desire for security and protection for their children. Children were continuously under the threat of illness, undernourishment, accidents, or other misfortune. Mothers lived under constant uncertainty of the future of their children. Performing Jiutiyā appeared to be a way to express this insecurity and to convert this fear into protective activity, tying a thread. The reward expected for the gift of committed observance of the *brata* was the protective power materializing in the threads.

[559] See, for example, Pearson 1996, 165.

[560] Pearson 1996, 165–167.

[561] Pearson 1996, 164–165.

Nīl Ṣaṣṭhī brata: pouring water on Śiva

The favourite feasts of Janbazari women, Jiutiyā and Chhaṭṭha pūjās, were not celebrated among women originating from Bengal. However, they had other feasts that communicated mothers' concerns for their children. Of several distinct *bratas* that Gantian women performed for the benefit of children, one stood out to be so popular that almost every woman in Ganti adhered to it. According to Ganti interviewee Parbo, "everybody does Nīl Ṣaṣṭhī".[562] The justification for this was exemplified by Sada's comment:[563]

> I observe the fast of Nīl (*Nīler uposa*) in the Caitra month.[564] If you are a mother of children you have to observe this fast. This fast is for the well-being of children.

The Nīl Ṣaṣṭhī brata was also familiar to the women of Harijan Basti. It was one of those many rituals which had been introduced to the Oriyan community by the surrounding Bengali people. Most women in Harijan Basti recognized the *brata*, and some had performed it. Harijan Basti interviewee Reha emphasized that the feast was primarily carried out by mothers with sons.[565]

Nīl Ṣaṣṭhī is one of the many Ṣaṣṭhī bratas celebrated in accordance with the local calendar (*pañjikā*). The booklets on women's *bratas* (*Meyedera Bratakathā*) mention eleven distinct Ṣaṣṭhī bratas, but there are more. [566] Basak mentions sixteen, but Nīl Ṣaṣṭhī is not included. In general, there is a Ṣaṣṭhī for every month. As previously shown, both recurrent (*nāimittika*) and desire-born (*kāmya*) devotion to Mā Ṣaṣṭhī are closely connected to fertility, childbirth, and children. The same is true of the calendary Ṣaṣṭhī bratas (*nitya*). Nīl Ṣaṣṭhī is done exclusively for the sake of children.

The performance of Nīl Ṣaṣṭhī takes place in the month of Caitra. The fruit (*brater phala*) of the faithful compliance with the Nīl Ṣaṣṭhī brata is defined in different versions of the *Stories of Women's Bratas* (*Meyedera Bratakathā*):

> Provided one performs this *brata* regularly, all of her sons and daughters will be protected from unfavourable and inauspicious times and from death.[567]

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[562] Parbo was interviewed in Ganti on 8 January 2004.

[563] Sada was interviewed in Ganti on 1 March 2004.

[564] Caitra is the last month of the Bengali year starting from the middle of March to the middle of April.

[565] Reha was interviewed in Harijan Basti on 18 March 2004.

[566] Ṣaṣṭhī bratas included in *Meyedera Bratakathā* are Ṣaṣṭhī of the forest (Araṇya Ṣaṣṭhī), Ṣaṣṭhī of the son-in-law (Jāmāi Ṣaṣṭhī), Ṣaṣṭhī of the golden hairclip (Luṇṭhana or Loṭana Ṣaṣṭhī), Ṣaṣṭhī of the rice cake (Cāpaṛā or Manthāna Ṣaṣṭhī), Durgā Ṣaṣṭhī, Mā Goṭha Ṣaṣṭhī, Mūlā Ṣaṣṭhī, Pāṭāi Ṣaṣṭhī, Śītalā Ṣaṣṭhī, Aśoka Ṣaṣṭhī, and Nīl Ṣaṣṭhī.

[567] Bhattāchārya, P. G., 184.

> Provided those women who have sons maintain (*pālana karā*) this *brata,* their children will remain free from bodily disease and live long.[568]
>
> Provided those women who have sons maintain this *brata,* their children will never have misfortune.[569]

The general intent of the Nīl Ṣaṣṭhī observance among the Ganti interviewees coincided well with the above quotes: Women believed that by observing the *brata,* their children (sons) would be protected against various threats. Even if women did not know the origin or the background of Nīl Ṣaṣṭhī, they were aware of the basic rules of its performance.

The procedure and customs related to Nīl Ṣaṣṭhī brata varied somewhat between the communities and devotees, but the rites had certain distinct elements and features that differentiated it from other observances. *Meyedera Bratakathā* describes the order (*niyama*) in which the Nīl Ṣaṣṭhī brata is performed:

> Nīl is the day before the Caitra month's *saṅkrānti*.[570] The day before Nīl, one has to stay temperate and eat only vegetarian food (*nirāmiṣa*). The next day one has to fast. One will give *pūjā* at home and in the evening – that is Nīl – one will light an earthen lamp (*pradīpa*) with clarified butter in the temple and drink holy water. On that day one should not eat anything. The mothers of girls can eat after the *pūjā*, but the mothers of sons cannot do that. Eight Nīl Ṣaṣṭhī bratas should be completed.[571]

The quote concentrates primarily on the timing of Nīl Ṣaṣṭhī and the order of fasting and performing the *pūjā*. The preparations required for fasting had to to begin the day before the actual fast. The votary was expected to cleanse both the body and mind for the upcoming feast. According to the fasting regulations, sons required extended fasting. This either conveyed mothers' preference of sons over daughters, or the belief that male children were thought to be more vulnerable to accidents and the attraction of evil and thus required more effort. In what follows, Ganti interviewee Rani elaborates the customs of celebrating Nīl Ṣaṣṭhī brata in her family:[572]

> I do Nīl Ṣaṣṭhī. It is in the Caitra month and we start after midday. […] I fast at home. I do not eat in the morning. At midday we do preparations. One takes five fruit, green coconut, water of the Ganges, milk, mango leaves with fruit and goes to Śītalā temple. There is Mahādeba.[573] One lights an earthen lamp (*pradīpa*) and gives *pūjā* at the Śītalā temple, and comes back. Inside the temple is Śiva god. When I do Nīl Ṣaṣṭhī, I pour wa-

[568] Bhattāchārya, S. H., 149.

[569] Kabiratno, 135.

[570] *Saṅkrānti* is the last day of each month, an important day of the monthly ritual cycle. It is considered an auspicious time to perform a rite.

[571] Bhattāchārya, P. G., 186.

[572] Rani was interviewed in Ganti on 2 February 2004.

[573] Mahādeba (the Great god, God of gods) refers to Lord Śiva (Biswas 2000; Sarkar 1972, 234).

> ter on the head of Śiva. One gives five fruit, pours water, lights a wax-candle (*momabāti*), invokes (the deity) with the conch shell instrument (*śaṅkha*) and bell (*ghaṇṭā*).[574] Then one bows down to show respect (*pranāma*), and that is it. We finish the *pūjā*. Then one comes home and unpacks the fruit and milk. I do not drink milk. […] We share and peel (the fruit), and take coconut, banana, and the fruit, and eat together.

The name Nīl Ṣaṣṭhī itself indicates that the *brata* is connected with the Lord Śiva; namely, *nīl* means blue, which is the colour of Śiva. In the view of Harijan Basti interviewee Boti, "Nīl Ṣaṣṭhī is for Bābā (Śiva)".[575] In fact, Śiva and his epithets are, among other things, invoked for the sake of sons, and for my informants the essential part of the Nīl Ṣaṣṭhī pūjā was to offer gifts to Śiva and to pour water on Śivaliṅga, clearly displaying the fertility aspect of Śiva.

### 5.3.2 Protecting the child from disease and evil effects

#### Fear of the evil eye

Several interviewees repeatedly brought up their concern for the security of their children. In addition to feasts such as Chhaṭha pūjā, Jiutiyā, and Nīl Ṣaṣṭhī, which clearly functioned as a way to express that very concern, women carried out various other preventive activities in order to protect their children from disease, misfortune, and evil influences. Women were well aware of how vulnerable the life of a newborn was under the living conditions in their neighbourhoods. They had seen that even diarrhoea, flu, or a minor infection could be fatal. Therefore, the survival of infants was not taken for granted.[576] Most women were active in taking protective measures (for their sons in particular).

These protective activities were not thought to be required only for the prevention of physical illnesses and accidents, but even more against the evil eye and evil effects – which the women believed ceaselessly influenced human lives. Some women renounced the existence of such entities, but most of the women interviewed considered evil powers a serious threat to themselves. To understand the features and nature of the evil effects we need to discuss the terms women used when referring to them.

In the course of analysing the interviews, it became clear that one of the most common expressions related to evil influence was the term *najara.* Antropologist David F. Pocock translates the

[574] Blowing of a *śaṅkha,* a large conch shell-shaped instrument, marks the closing of a ritual observance. *Ghaṇṭā* is a metal bell rung during the rituals to either invoke the deity, ward off evil spirits, or to distract the devotee from outside noise.

[575] Boti was interviewed in Harijan Basti on 5 February 2004.

[576] The other side of the coin is that people living under such harsh conditions know that even minimal negligence in childcare would be of assistance in getting rid of an unwanted child. Even though child mortality rate was high, I did not witness nor was I told about such intentional carelessness in the three communities under my study.

term *najara* as 'evil eye'.[577] The noun *najara* in Bengali refers to 'sight', 'glance', 'look', and 'notion', but also to 'evil look'.[578] The expression *najara deoyā* can be translated as 'to keep one's eye on', but it often means 'to cast an evil eye upon'. A common expression *najara lāgā* usually stands for 'to fall under the evil influence' or 'to be affected by the evil eye'.[579] The analysis of my interviewees' usage of the term *najara* confirms that the term usually referred to 'evil' or 'evil eye' – as Pocock suggests – but this particular nuance was emphasized when *najara* is combined with a verb.

Other terms that were used in reference to evil effects express people's beliefs concerning the nature and qualities of evil entities. Both Bengali words *bātāsa* and *hāoyā* stand for 'air' or 'wind', and when they are combined with the verb *lāgā,* the meaning is usually 'to be caught by an evil spirit'. Similarly, when the interviewees used *bātāsa* and *hāoyā* together with the verb *paṛā* (fall)*,* it usually meant 'evil spirit to fall on someone'. Thus, air and wind indicated the nature and qualities people believed the evil spirit had.[580]

Interviews revealed that most women recognized the evil influence or ill effects that were thought to be transmitted through a person's gaze, and were usually experienced as air or wind-like spirits that interrupted and disturbed the harmony in human lives. The fear of an envious person's look, or what is called the evil eye, is a widespread folk belief found in various human societies.[581] According to women studied, the evil eye was not considered a separate entity, such as a deity, with distinct features; it was thought to enter a person as a consequence of an envious, evil look. This is how Harijan Basti interviewee Banu explained the working of the evil eye:[582]

> If we walk outside and other people look at the baby saying how beautiful the baby is, they may cast an evil eye upon (*najara deoyā*) the baby. We are afraid of the baby getting ill.

Similarly, most interviewees agreed that envy potentially caused damage to others, and that a destructive envious gaze was most likely turned on fragile infants – especially baby boys – who were thought to represent the very prosperity of a family. Among the people in the research neighbourhoods, any sickness or disorder in a baby could be interpreted as a consequence of an envious look.

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[577] Pocock 1997, 50. Pocock carried out an ethnographic research in a Gujarati village, in which he studied people's conception of *najara*, evil eye.

[578] The precise expression of evil eye or malicious look in Bengali is *kunajara*, but it was not used among the women studied (Biswas 2000).

[579] Biswas 2000; Chaki 2007, 497.

[580] Chaki 2007, 652, 911.

[581] Bowker shows that parallel behaviour and beliefs exist at least in Hindu, Jewish, and Islam folk traditions (Bowker 1997, 328).

[582] Banu was interviewed in Harijan Basti on 10 March 2004.

But who had such an evil eye? In her study on magico-religious beliefs Stork maintains that individuals whose glance is believed to carry malignant powers are usually unaware of it themselves.[583] It is commonly thought that they lack something in their lives, and they are thus jealous of those that possess what they desire. The most usual suspects are old people, widows in particular, infertile women, and women whose children were stillborn. This partly explains why small children are considered to be such popular targets of envious looks.

Pocock discusses the mechanism of fear of envy in terms of "an inevitable feature of a world in which men set store by looks, or health, or goods, or any pleasant thing" (Pocock 1997, 52). There is always someone deprived of the things one has, and this gives grounds for fear. No one is completely immune to the envy of others. Pocock discovered that people rarely envy those in a clearly higher position, who are out of their reach, yet, "what affect us more closely are the things which seem to just elude our grasp – the things which are only just better than the things that we have, and with which, therefore, we can compare them" (Pocock 1997, 53). In Pocock's view, envy is a fundamental element of human communities, and forces people to prepare themselves against its consequences.

Women could not identify individuals with an envious gaze but they believed that anyone having extraordinary features could cast an evil eye and cause harm.[584] Even though women did not know the source of an evil influence, they recognized its effects. If their children suddenly fell ill, or if anything unwelcome happened unexpectedly, they suspected an external evil impact. According to Stork's psychoanalytic approach, fear of the evil eye derives from the insecurity of a mother as she realizes the fragility of her baby and the dangers that threaten the survival of the child.[585] In the communities studied the fear of losing one's child was not without reason. It was not the high infant mortality rates alone; children also got lost without an explanation. In the course of the fieldwork I did not come across any other evidence, but some Harijan Basti women bore witness that some children in their neighbourhood went missing.

### Methods of protecting the child from evil effects

It can be argued that most of the women's religious activities were to some extent observed in order to protect family members from misfortune, accidents, bad luck, and evil effects. In addition to regular rituals, women carried out activities that predominantly had a protective purpose. Some followed a typical custom of Hindu mothers: They blessed (*āśīrbāda karā*) their family members by drawing a holy mark (*ṭikā*) on their foreheads at the closing of the morning *pūjā*. One of the most common explanations given to the painting of the holy mark was its protective

[583] Stork 1992, 102.

[584] In my previous study on Tamil low caste women I was faced with a similar situation. People believed in the malign influence of the evil eye but no one could point out one with such a look (Uuksulainen 1999, 123–124).

[585] Stork 1992, 102–103.

capacity. It was thought to signify the promise of blessing and protection. As the *ṭikā* was drawn after completing the offering of gifts during *pūjā,* it was understood as a reward granted to a devotee in exchange for the offerings and worship.[586]

In some of my interviewees' families the *ṭikā* was painted (by Brahman priests) occasionally during important feasts and celebrations or when a family member needed special protection, but some mothers painted the *tikā* every day, except at times of impurity. The *ṭikā* is known to indicate the religious background of the family. Among the interviewees it was usually smeared with red vermilion turmeric powder or with dust of sacrificial fire (*yajña*). Śaivas in general use ash and Śāktas red turmeric. My Vaiṣṇava informant told that she used sandalwood paste. Harijan Basti interviewee Reha claimed that the smearing of ash had been beneficial for her son:[587]

> When my son had fever I smeared on him a black *tikā* and he got well. […] During the fire ritual (*yajña*) wood is burnt. You mark the (ritual) space, take wood and clarified butter (*ghi*), and light it. After finishing the ritual, you keep the dust and make *ṭikā*. It is painted on children. Yesterday my son got a fever. I know how to safeguard him (*āmar rākhā āche*). I will smear *ṭikā* tomorrow once again and he will be fine.

Reha's quote shows the connection between protection and smearing of *ṭikā.* Reha maintained that she knew how to safeguard her son (*āmar rākhā āche*).[588] She believed that a fever was the symptom of an external influence that could be chased away by a protective smearing of *ṭikā*, as she had previously rid her son of illness in this way.

The diligence in observing different protective activities varied a great deal between women. Some prepared themselves for the worst and saw the danger of evil attacts in every corner of their lives. Others contented themselves with complying with a few basic protective customs. Harijan Basti devotee Boti was afraid of evil powers attacking her son and she had become used to taking preventive measures:[589]

> When my baby was very little I used to draw collyrium (*kājala*) on him. When he got a little older I made him wear an amulet (*māduli*). There is an evil eye (*najara*). That is why I used to do these things. I mean, had I done nothing, I would have been even more scared that something would happen to my child. Is it not so? I used to keep a broom (*jhāṛu*) and gift (*dāna*) on my son's bed. I kept them by his head.[590] I put a coconut and cutter there. […] One has to keep these things close to a child's head. One also keeps

[586] The idea of a blessing (*āśīrbāda*) as a return gift is also advanced by Gupta in her account on Hindu ritual (Gupta 1997, 92–94).

[587] Reha was interviewed in Harijan Basti on 18 March 2004.

[588] The term *rākhā* is usually translated as 'preservation', 'rescue', 'security', or 'upkeep' (Biswas 2000).

[589] Boti was interviewed in Harijan Basti on 5 February 2004.

[590] The practice of placing protective items such as a broom, animal bone, and old shoes next to a child's head is reported also by Blanchet (1984, 102).

these things at the place where one gives offerings (*baliser talae*). […] I used to leave them there when I went to work outside, to a bazaar, or somewhere else.

Figure 19: Mothers paint large black fingermarks on the cheeks and forehead of their babies to protect them against evil effects.

Boti introduces several distinct practices that people in the fieldwork areas carried out for defending their children against evil effects. She used to paint her son's eyes black with collyrium.[591] The purpose of the custom is to make the baby look so ugly that she or he does not attract envious people – and potentially the evil eye. For the same reason, mothers painted large black fingermarks on the cheeks and forehead of their babies – on baby sons in particular. Some of their families had special customs concerning the use of collyrium. One example is the family of Janbazar interviewee Unni:[592]

> We apply collyrium (*kājala*) on the babies' eyes to ward off evil (*najara*). We prepare *kājala* in different ways. *Kājala* is prepared after twelve days (from the birth). We ourselves do not prepare it but my husband's sister (*nanada*) has to prepare it. It is a custom that she prepares it after setting a price for it. She says: "Give me a set of earrings or nose ring only then will I prepare it." When the *kājala* is prepared like this, it is then put into use.

[591] Collyrium is a kind of black coal.

[592] Unni was interviewed in Janbazar on 6 January 2004.

Unni emphasizes the importance of following a certain order before the *kājala* is painted on a child. Adhering to the right conduct is thought to endow *kājala* with special power and meaning. It has a price and therefore more value and protective power.

In addition to *kājala,* most babies in the fieldwork areas were given an amulet (*māduli*) to wear. It was also common that the mother wore one on behalf of her child.[593] Similar to *kājala*, an amulet was believed to give protection against evil effects and illnesses. It represented either the power of a certain deity in particular or protective power in general. Several women considered wearing an amulet not only good for health and general well-being but also for protection. In the following, Harijan Basti interviewees Banu and Ru demonstrate common beliefs and ideas as regards the wearing of an amulet.[594]

> They give amulets (*māduli*) at the temple. The temple priest (*purōhita*) gives them and there are different kinds of Fathers (*Bābās*) who give them. We put them on our children for their health and happiness. (Banu)

> I wear an amulet (*māduli*) of goddess Kālī (*ṭhākura*). My husband also wears it. We wear it for a certain reason. […] This amulet is from a priest (*purohita*) of the Dakshineswar temple. We have gone there several times. I have confidence that Kālī protects us. (Ru)

The common protective amulet in the fieldwork areas was a plain thread tied around the waist, neck, wrist, or arm. In Ganti, Harijan Basti, and Janbazar, children were most often protected against evil with threads having small metal capsules containing traditional medicine, a plant, or other healing objects. It was not rare that people wore pieces of bone or particles of an animal or human as an amulet. As discussed earlier in this study, these, even when potentially malevolent are believed to have great powers. Janbazar interviewee Sumi told about a practice that was used for protecting children:[595]

> In the fear of evil (*najara*) they gave my son an amulet (*māduli*) with particles of a fish in a fishing hook, a kind of needle.[596] This was done when the children were small.

People tried to ward off evil both by disturbing the evil entities and by pleasing them with gifts, similar to ones offered to deities. Some women kept a twig (*najara kāṭhi*) or broom (*jhāṛu*) in their homes in order to show the evil spirits that they were not welcome and that they would be chased away if they attempted to enter the house. In earlier quote, Boti said that she used to keep a cutter by her son's bed. The sharp blade of the cutter was meant to frighten the evil spirits

[593] Uusikylä, in her study on birth practices in Bangladesh, mentions that in her fieldwork site pregnant mothers were given an amulet (*tabiz*) during the fifth month of pregnancy "in order to 'bind' the mother's body and to protect the fetus" (Uusikylä 2000, 150).

[594] Banu was interviewed on 10 March 2004 and Ru on 2 December 2003, both of them in Harijan Basti.

[595] Sumi was interviewed in Janbazar on 11 February 2004.

[596] Blanchet mentions about a similar practice in Bangladesh. The fishing hook is worn in order to catch the evil spirit who may enter places where it is unwelcome (Blanchet 1984, 102).

away. Some were confident that strong smoke made their stay so unpleasant that they would run off. Another typical means to prevent evil from entering the house was to take something bitter or strong-tasting such as lemons or red chillies around the house, or to hang them at the entrance of the house. A similar method was also used in protecting babies. This is what Janbazar interviewee Praba recommended:[597]

> You have to take red chilli and mustard seed. You burn it and take it around your child. Many women do this to protect the child from the evil eye.

Praba and many others introduced a great variety of protective practices. While many interviewees admitted they had doubts whether evil spirits really existed, they, however, continued to take protective measures. They may have been told by the community development workers of the LWSI not to take such beliefs seriously, but many were not quite sure if they dared not to.

## Deities preventing calamities, diseases, and ills

### Crisis deity Bipodtāriṇī

Before exploring methods and specialists in exorcizing evil effects, I will introduce some gods and goddesses that my interviewees believed had a special mandate for protecting devotees and preventing illnesses and evil influences. These deities included both great gods and goddesses (*baṛo ṭhākura*) and various regionally-based crisis deities.[598] Most great deities such as Kālī were thought to have a range of functions other than protection, but crisis deities were known for their protective capacity in particular.

One of the most common crisis deities among the interviewees – worshipped in Ganti and Harijan Basti in particular – was Bipodtāriṇī. The name of the goddess itself reveals her function as protectress from misfortunes and dangers. The term *bipod* refers to 'danger', 'calamity', or any 'adversity', and *tāriṇī* to a 'female deliverer' or 'saviour'.[599] Goddess Bipodtāriṇī is a Bengali variation of goddess Mā Tāriṇī, one of the best-known protective goddesses in Orissa.[600] One Harijan Basti interviewee, Reha, did not differentiate between Bipodtāriṇī and Tāriṇī but referred to them as equals – which is not surprising due to her Oriyan background. Some maintained that Bipodtāriṇī was originally from Sundarbans, a forest area in the south-east of Bengal.

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[597] Praba was interviewed in Janbazar on 11 February and 5 March 2004.

[598] Crisis deities were born as a response to various threats people have faced. Some have come to life as a result of one particular crisis. A good example of such a deity is Olāicaṇḍī (or Olāibibi), the goddess of cholera. She was invented as a consequence of Bengal's cholera epidemic in 1817. Several goddesses are similarly associated with illness. Other deities serve a more general purpose as deliverers from danger and calamity. Many crisis deities have been developed and remodified in accordance with changes in the surrounding society (Banerjee 2002, 3).

[599] Biswas 2000.

[600] Basak 2006, 107–108; Mallebrein 2004, 155–165.

Reha was convinced that goddess Bipodtāriṇī had saved her son from a serious accident. Being a widow she had made her daughter observe fasts and customs related to the deity. She related this experience with Bipodtāriṇī:[601]

> It is mainly Bengali people who do this *pūjā.* It is Bipodtāriṇī. My daughter does it. Bipodtāriṇī is one who keeps the family safe (*bāṅcā*).[602] […] My daughter has done it (the Bipodtāriṇī pūjā), I have not done it.[603] […] She has to fast for a whole day. Then she gives us red threads and ties them (on us). This makes things right. […] Everyone in the family wears one. If there is a son, it will be tied on the hand of a son. The Brahman does not give it; it is given by the one who does the *pūjā.* One is supposed to wear it for the whole year. If there is any danger (*bipod*), she (the goddess) will come to give protection. […] Six months before the wedding of my daughter my son Sano was run over by a bus, but Tāriṇī protected him. I pleaded to the goddess and gave her a *pūjā*. […] One day a man came to tell me that my son had died. I was afraid and said (to the goddess) crying, "won't you tell me how this can happen, Mother (Bipodtāriṇī)?" I took off work and went there. […] I went to the place where the bus had run over (my son), but there was no bus. Tāriṇī helped me and we found my son. He had taken a bath and I told him to wait. I went to take a bath, gave her (goddess) a *pūjā,* and came back. […] I cried the whole day. This is already my third thread I am wearing and I think that it is this goddess that keeps my son well. There will not be any danger. I think that I will always turn to this goddess.

The above quote shows that, similar to Jiutiyā pūjā, the thread tied to the arm or hand was believed to convey the protective power of the goddess, as long as it was accompanied by fasting and *pūjā*. Reha herself as a widowed woman was not eligible to perform the rituals but benefitted from her daughter's obedience to them. In reciting the story of the accident Reha repeatedly said that she turned to the goddess to give her a *pūjā*. She reacted by giving a *pūjā* when she received the bad news, and again after she found her son alive, and at the end, as she planned to remain faithful to the goddess. The performing of *pūjā* at the different stages of the story seemed to be the way Reha communicated with the deity. At first she cried for help, then she showed her gratitude, and finally, she assured the goddess of her fidelity, all by performing a *pūjā.* Reha's behaviour expresses the logic of the reciprocated gift. She believed in gaining protection in exchange for her gift of *pūjā*. The gift of protection was symbolised by the red thread that was animated through the ritual conduct and the giving of *pūjā* in particular. The quote shows Reha's profound confidence in the protective capacity of goddess Bipodtāriṇī.

[601] Reha was interviewed in Harijan Basti on 18 March 2004.

[602] The verb *bāṅcā* is usually translated as 'to live' and 'to keep alive' (Biswas 2000).

[603] Reha refers to the Bipodtāriṇī brata performed in the month of Āṣāḍh (from the middle of June to the middle of July). To perform this *brata* one requires thirteen strands of red thread (Basak 2006, 108; Bhattāchārya P.G., 68–69).

Śītalā Mā: all-purpose disease goddess and divinity of a community

For Ganti and Harijan Basti people the most popular crisis deity was Śītalā Mā, generally referred to as the goddess of smallpox.[604] Śītalā Mā is well known throughout most areas of Northern India, yet the cult is most developed in the state of West Bengal. While the main association of Mā Śītalā is with pox – similar to her close South Indian parallel goddess Māriāmmān – it does not do her justice to identify her merely with pox.[605] In some regions she has been given a role of protector of children and giver of good fortune. When bestowed with such attributes the goddess is thought to be reminiscent of the Bengali goddess Mā Ṣaṣṭhī.[606]

Mā Śītalā feasts have no fixed date common to all of her devotees; communities arrange and establish Śītalā pūjās in accordance with their own traditions. It is customary for mothers to make vows to Śītalā and to have their children wear charm neckleces which include a coin for the goddess.[607] Some of my interviewees recognized Śītalā Ṣaṣṭhī brata, but did not recall the calendric timing of the feast.[608] The most common seasons for Śītalā pūjās are the spring (*basanta*) and summer (*grīṣma*) months. This derives from the fact that epidemics usually struck in the spring.[609] According to Nicholas, the Bengali word *basanta,* spring, is the most commonly used term for smallpox.[610] Ganti women celebrated the annual Śītalā pūjā either in the month of Caitra or Baiśākha, whereas Harijan Basti devotees adhered to the annual observance on four consecutive Tuesdays in the month of Āśbina.[611]

[604] The name Mā Śītalā is usually translated as the Cool One, which refers to her qualities and to the requirement of a proper balance between hot and cold (Ferrari 2010b, 146; Nicholas 1982, 198; Wadley 1980, 33).

[605] Ferrari 2007, 82–85; 2010b, 145–148.

[606] See, for example, Ferrari 2007, 93; Nicholas 1982, 198; Wadley 1980, 33–35.

[607] The various customs and rites are recorded, for example, by Kolenda 1982, 231–234.

[608] Śītalā Ṣaṣṭhī brata is usually observed on the sixth day of the bright half of the Māgha month (from the middle of January to the middle of February) (Bhattāchārya, P.G., 165).

[609] Kolenda 1982, 230; Wadley 1980, 37–38.

[610] Nicholas 1982, 198.

[611] The Caitra month is from the middle of March to the middle of April, Baiśākha from the middle of April to the middle of May, and Āśbina from the middle of September to the middle of October.

Figure 20: Offering gifts to goddess Mā Śītalā

In Ganti, some women worshipped Mā Śītalā in the form of a sacred tree, but most women had started to offer *pūjā* at the Mā Śītalā temple outside the neighbourhood. The temple seemed to be newly constructed and it attracted Śītalā devotees from the whole surrounding area. As mentioned, Śītalā worship in general has recently gone through changes, which can be seen both in the mushrooming of Śītalā temples and shrines and in the development of Śītalā's image. In Harijan Basti a devoted family built a concrete temple where they installed an effigy representing the goddess Mā Śītalā. One of the interviewees, Dua, belonged to the family of temple builders, and descibed Śītalā worship in her family:[612]

> My mother, father and we all do Śītalā pūjā. We have a temple. My grandfather (*dādu*) made that temple with his own hands (pointing to the concrete temple building by the club house of Harijan Basti). He used the neem tree and built it by hand. Now my little sister is doing that *pūjā*. Earlier my grandfather and grandmother (*ṭhākurmā*) observed the *pūjā*. All my ancestors did this *pūjā*. It is the most important *pūjā* for me as well.

The Mā Śītalā temple building constructed by Dua's family stood somewhat isolated outside the main living quarters in the middle of the playground area of Harijan Basti. There were no other permanent temple constructions in the slum. I was told that the Harijan Basti club owned the

[612] Dua was interviewed in Harijan Basti on 29 January 2004.

temple.[613] Occasionally the club members collected funds for the maintenance and décor of the temple, especially before a feast. The Mā Śītalā temple was taken into use during the main feasts when a major collective ritual of the community (*bāriyāri pūjā* or *pāṛār pūjā*) was performed. Women, for instance, offered *pūjā* to Mā Śītalā at the temple as part of the marriage rituals. The temple was a clear sign not only of the formalization of Mā Śītalā worship, but also of community worship in general. When people invited a Brahman to perform a ritual, the *pūjā* was in most cases carried out at the temple, whereas spontaneous, more ordinary devotion still took place by the communal sacred tree.

Building a concrete temple house with an effigy is generally understood to testify to the rise in status of a deity. Śītalā, the previous minor deity of smallpox, who had mostly been venerated in the form of a tree or stone, had evolved into an established goddess with anthropomorphic features.[614] In the communities studied this development was quite recent, yet the iconography of Mā Śītalā has a lengthy history. Her attributes have been recorded in popular vernacular religious literature and even in Sanskrit texts.[615] The myths usually describe her as a beautiful maiden who, however, appears to people as a witchlike old woman.[616] In Harijan Basti and in Ganti the human-shaped effigy of Mā Śītalā had been stripped of her typical features of carrying a broom, water vessel, and winnowing fan. The disguised (often naked) old Brahman widow had turned into Śītalā, a beautiful married woman riding a donkey. There was little left of the ugly Śītalā. The goddess was identifiable primarily because of the donkey, Śītalā's *bāhana* (animal considered as the deity's vehicle). In the Śītalā temple of Ganti, the winnowing fan, one of the traditional signs of Mā Śītalā, was placed on the wall of the temple house.

[613] Fieldwork diary, 7 September 2003.

[614] A similar ascending of the deity is also happening to Mā Ṣaṣṭhī, goddess of children and fertility.

[615] Wadley 1980, 35–36. The earliest most important Bengali source is the lengthy poems of *Śītalā Maṅgala* published in 1870s. Śītalā is not well known in classical Sanskrit sources, but appears in a variety of later works. According to Wadley, the main Sanskit sources are *Skandapurāṇa*, *Bhabaprakāśa*, an Ayervedic medical text, and the *Bhabiṣyapurāṇa* (Wadley 1980, 59).

[616] Nicholas 1982, 199.

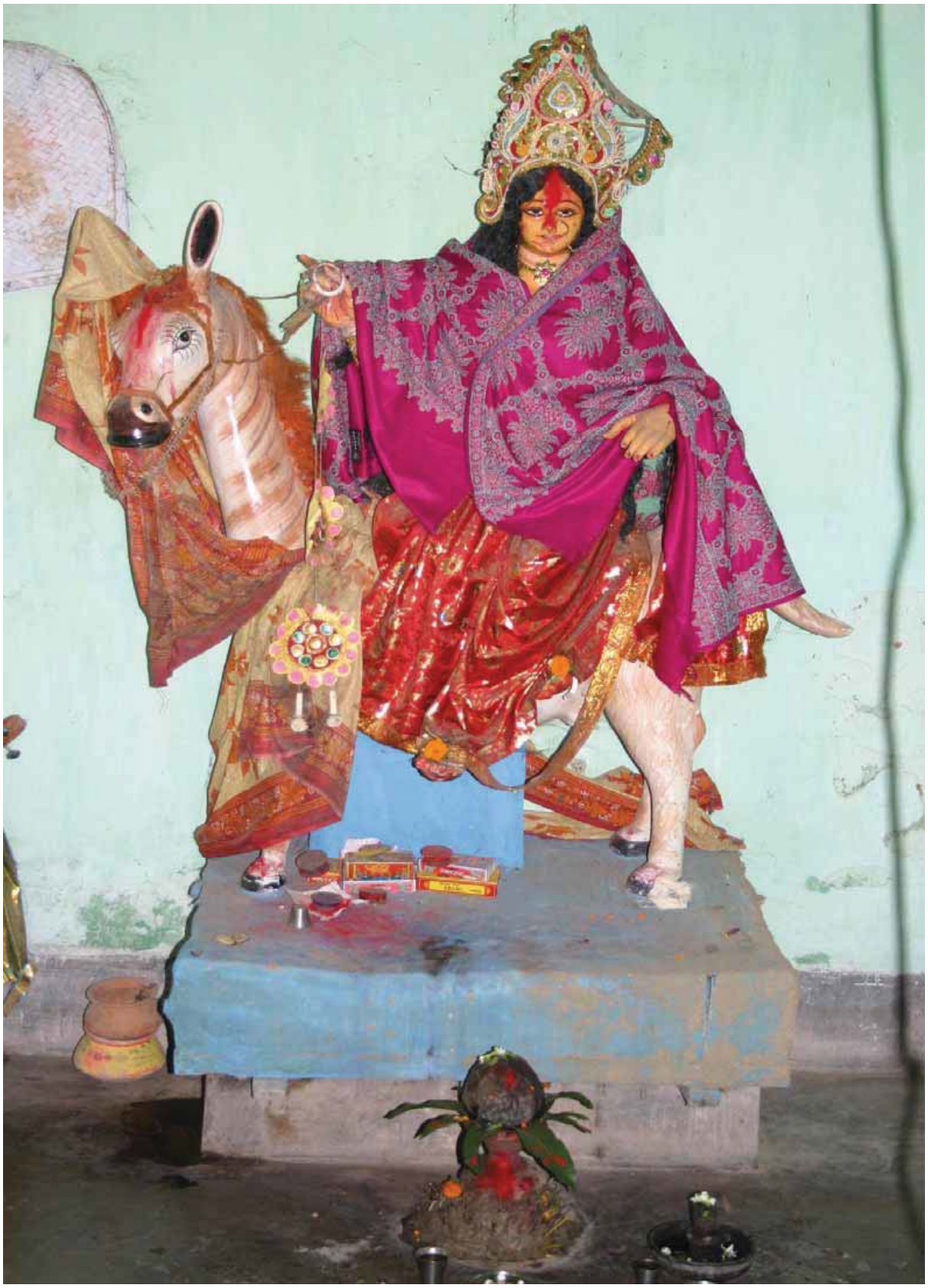

Figure 21: Beautification of goddess Mā Śītalā suggests a change in her cult and has also influenced the domain of the deity.

The beautification of Mā Śītalā suggests a change in her cult and has influenced the domain of the deity. Mā Śītalā was no longer considered merely a deity of smallpox, but a deity of pox and illness in general, and even more. According to McDaniel, in the past ten years Śītalā has "taken on a new specialization and become the AIDS goddess" who is thought to both cause and cure AIDS (McDaniel 2004, 65).[617] My interviewees, however, did not mention Śītalā's association with AIDS. Instead, people of Harijan Basti had adopted Śītalā as a divinity of their community.[618] Most families – particularly women – participated in her *pūjās* and carried out various observances in her name. Mā Śītalā had replaced a traditional village deity (*grāmadēbatā*) and gathered 'an urban village' into a single unit. While the goddess was still given her original role as a deity of pox, she was also growing in significance as an all-purpose crisis deity, and even absorbing some attributes of great benign goddesses. Women told that they turned to Mā Śītalā for almost any concern or unresolved problem. She was invoked by women hoping to become pregnant, but first and foremost for the protection and cure of sick children. This is how Harijan Basti interviewees justified Śītalā worship:[619]

> To get protection for my children after their birth I did mainly *pūjā* for the great gods and for Śītalā Mā. (Reha)
>
> I do merely Śītalā pūjā. […] One child of my daughter-in-law was suffering and cried a lot. I asked Mā why this was happening. I prayed (*prārthanā*) to Mā. Now the child is fine. (Dua)
>
> If the children have any sickness I call Śītalā Mā. Parents can ask: "Śītalā, keep our children well. Measles are spreading and destroying us." […] We do not go to see a doctor but we give *pūjā*. When we give *pūjā* the sickness will go away. If we go to see a doctor we will be harmed. One does not really get well. We give *pūjā* to make the goddess cool.[620] I water the neem tree. I burn incense (*dhunā*) at our house and cook simple food. I do not prepare fish. I keep everything very clean. In doing so, it (sickness) will go away on its own. It will take five or seven days. (Pho)

These quotes show women's profound trust in the goddess who was thought to both prevent and cure illnesses. Pho even claimed that visiting a doctor could cause harm. She is more orthodox here than she was when discussing the reliability of doctor and deity. The above quotes suggest that Mā Śītalā was considered a deity of any illness, not just a deity of pox. One wonders if women considered Mā Śītalā as a protective deity or a deity who actually potentially threatened people with a terrible disease. Was her worship motivated by the fear of a deity who – if left dissatisfied – could punish the unfaithful devotee with a disease? Some quotes suggest that she was

[617] The advancement of Śītalā into an AIDS-goddess is discussed by Ferrari 2007, 93–97.

[618] The role of Śītalā as the divinity of a community is recognized also by Nicholas (1982, 198–200).

[619] Reha was interviewed on 18 March 2004, Dua on 29 January 2004, and Pho on 4 March 2004.

[620] Pho here refers to the essential feature of Mā Śītalā, the Cool One. The goddess is generally believed to abhor heat and seek coolness. She is thought to reward those who make her cool and to burn those who cause her to burn. Mā Śītalā is supposed to be given gifts that cool her down. It is believed that if she is dissatisfied she heats others by attacking them with the dreaded pox (Kolenda 1982, 236; Wadley 1980, 35).

a kind, protective deity similar to, for example, Lakṣmī, but others reveal her demanding nature: A devotee had to keep the deity calm and cool in order not to disturb her. The second sentence in Pho's quote provides a clue. I translated the cry of parents "Śītalā, keep our children well", but in the Bengali language it can also be translated as "Śītalā, leave our children intact". In a similar vein, Mā Śītalā was invoked to provide well-being and protection as well as to stay away from children. Kolenda in her study on Mother Pox in the North Indian village of Khalapur argues that the intention to worship and offer hospitality to Śītalā and other similar mother goddesses is to "fend them off, keep them away, or if they are too close, to remove them to a safe distance" (Kolenda 1982, 231).

Ganti interviewee Alo had lost six children to pox, measles, and other diseases. As she put it, she had taken her children one by one to goddess Śītalā:[621]

> Alo: So many of my children died, but this one (pointing at her only daughter) I left on a banana leaf. You do not see the pox (in her) […] After giving birth to her I left her sleeping on a banana leaf. I did not place her on a cloth.[622] Many died. Her two elder brothers died. Do you understand? Two of her brothers died and one young woman (*baudi*) died. […] Do you understand? And two more children died. One girl died in that flower garden.[623] She got measles, and then one son died of measles as well. All died. One by one I took everyone to the goddess (*ṭhākura*).
>
> Interviewer: Are you not angry at the goddess because of that?
>
> Alo: Hatred does not do any good. The deity is Śītalā goddess (*ṭhākura*). Śītalā is the pox. She is a goddess of that kind. Her *pūjā* is held every year during the spring (*basantakāla*). I do it every year. […] What God wills that will happen. Whom will Hari save? [624] The one He wishes. No one else can be saved.

In the above quote Alo linked Mā Śītalā and the pox as equals when she said that Śītalā is the pox, a goddess of that kind.[625] The way Alo expressed her loss indicates that in her view the goddess of pox had the right to take away her children. In the course of her interview she recalled the deaths of her children and the difficulties she had faced in her life, but her attitude towards the goddess was neither rebellious nor bitter. Quite the opposite, she said that she continuously celebrated the annual *pūjā* for Mā Śītalā. She could have given up adhering to it, and participated

[621] Alo was interviewed in Ganti on 11 March 2004.

[622] This was a way to protect the child from contagion.

[623] There was a flower garden next to the Ganti neighbourhood.

[624] Hari is one name for the god Viṣṇu, but also used as a general name of god.

[625] Kolenda came to a similar conclusion in her ethnographic work. The goddess Mother Pox was thought to be the illness itself. Kolenda noted that the sick, the victims of the deity, were treated like the image of the goddess and that the sickhouse turned into a temple where people prayed to the "deity to depart and take up residence elsewhere" (Kolenda 1982, 235). Ferrari, for his part, suggests a different view. According to his informants, "Śītalā is not to be identified with disease. [...] Smallpox, measles and fevers exist independently and they are already inside our body – though inactive. Śītalā simply controls them. [...] Those features which Western medicine calls 'symptoms' are a sign of Śītalā activating presence" (Ferrari 2010b, 146–147).

in other feasts instead, but she chose to continue invoking Mā Śītalā. Even though Alo agonized over her fate, she did not question the justness of the deity.

What about the logic of reciprocity, the exchange of gifts, in the case of Alo? Alo had given up her children to the deity, and in addition she offered Mā Śītalā a regular *pūjā*. What was she gaining in return? Protection was of no use since she had lost almost everything. What possibly motivated her to continue? Alo did not reply to this question, but I assume it was devotion and habit. When her children were suffering from the measles, she had brought gifts for Mā Śītalā, offered prayers, and fervently begged the goddess to stay away from her children.[626] Meanwhile, she had learned the myths and rituals of the goddess. Accoring to Nicholas, "the myth and ritual of Śītalā make it possible for people to recognize 'the grace of Mother' even in their own suffering. […] Śītalā reminds Bengalis that the mother that gave them birth is also a punisher" (Nicholas 1982, 206). In his study on the Śītalā cult, Ferrari notes that Śītalā devotees tend to "look contagion as a (desirable) form of possession" (Ferrari 2010b, 145). If Alo agreed, it would have been consoling for her to think that her children were chosen by the goddess as mediators of the divine presence.

## Śani: the god of Saturday

Another popular protective deity among the women studied was god Śani. According to Niyogi, Śani became an enormously popular deity in the Kolkata and Howrah townships in the 1980s, and his influence continued expanding to the areas of 24 Parganas – including those areas where my fieldwork was carried out.[627] God Śani has several traditions, their common link being the belief that Śani has a great potential for malevolence. He is worshipped as the Lord of Saturday (Śanibār) by people of different classes and castes all around India. Even if Śani's evil influence is mentioned in the *Mahābhārata*, Śani was better known to the interviewees from the stories and poems (*pañcālī*) of the Bengali folk tradition. Śani was also revered as a planetary god, a son of the sun god (*Sūrya*), embodied in Saturn, one of the nine planets (*Nabagraha*) which are the primary celestial beings in Vedic astrology. Śani's characteristics are best understood if one looks at the way his presence is explained in astrological charts: If the deity is placed auspiciously, Śani stands for a flourishing career, good health and success, but if he is placed unfavourably, his malevolent effects are believed to be possibly severe.[628]

The iconography of Śani often pictures him as black or green-black in colour, holding a sword, with arrows and daggers in his four hands, and riding a black vulture or raven.[629] My interviewees obliged Śani mainly to avoid ill effects and misfortune. According to Niyogi, Śani is feared

[626] Kolenda reports that when someone was infected by pox in Khalapur, people promised Śītalā various gifts and offerings "in return for her departure from a sick" (Kolenda 1982, 232).

[627] Niyogi 1987, 43.

[628] Niyogi 1987, 42–43.

[629] Niyogi 1987, 42.

for his evil eye. It is believed that if he casts his eye on any person he or she is bound to suffer.[630] Women considered Śani's fearful character an indication of his great protective capacity. This is true for other protective deities as well. Devotees of Śani did not necessarily dare approach the deity directly; instead, they turned to various gods for relief from the ill effects of the terrifying Śani. In different traditions the malicious influence of Śani can be softened by the worship of Lord Hanumān, Viṣṇu, or Śiva. My interviewees approached Śani mainly through mother goddesses.

One interviewee compared Śani with the goddess Kālī. Both gods were believed to have great powers, potentially beneficial or harmful, and both of them were invoked for their protection. The task of a devotee was to channel the divine potential into good results. Among the participants in this study Śani was usually included in the group of great gods (*baṛo ṭhākura*), and people worshipped him regularly on Saturdays at a temple dedicated to one of the main gods or goddesses, or at a temple dedicated to the worship of planets (and planet gods) in particular. Women usually approached Śani through Kālī or Nārāyaṇa. Ganti interviewee Mila repoeted that she herself seldom worshipped Śani but that her son had taken to regularly serving the deity:[631]

> Mila: My son gives a *pūjā* for the great gods once a week. The god is called Śani. It is done on Saturdays. My son goes (to the temple) to give the *pūjā.* The god is called Graharājā (king of planets). […] I go to the temple by foot once a year with things from the bazaar. […] My son loves to give *pūjā.* He also loves this *pūjā.* […] (By giving *pūjā* for) Graha (Planet), it is said that Mother will end the misfortune.
>
> Interviewer: Do you want Śani's protection for yourself?
>
> Mila: Yes. Money does not make things well, the nurse does not make things well. If you give Graha god (*ṭhākura*) a *pūjā*, it will make things well.

In her quote Mila uses Śani and Graha interchangeably. Śani is the Planet (Graha), to whom one should give a *pūjā* in order for Mother to end the misfortune. The Mother Mila referred to was Mā Kālī, whom she believed was the principal mother goddess having the authority to protect one from bad luck. Mā Kālī was given the role of an agent who mediates the good effects of the worship.

Most women interviewed were following a fast or other observance regularly on Saturdays, the day that was dedicated to the great gods. Harijan Basti interviewee Reha had learned from her mother and other female relatives to fast for Śani. She listed a number of reasons why she was abiding by the *brata*:[632]

> Reha: On Saturdays I go to the temple of the great gods (*baṛo ṭhākura*).

[630] Niyogi 1987, 42.

[631] Mila was interviewed in Ganti on 28 January 2004. It was rare – yet not exceptional – that the boys of the younger generation participated in the regular observance of rituals.

[632] Reha was interviewed in Harijan Basti on 18 March 2004.

> Interviewer: Great gods mean Kālī and?
>
> Reha: No, it is Śani. Śani is a black-coloured god and he has four hands. […] He is like Kālī but a male god. He rescues (*rākhā karā*) us from everything.
>
> Interviewer: When you approach Śani, what is it that you usually want?
>
> Reha: I do it for the sake of my children. I do it for our house. I have a taken a loan, for these reasons. I also want my children to stay healthy, and that there would not be fights anywhere, and that there would not be danger. And that my health would get a little better, and that I could save some money for my children. And what else? […] I have seen it (*pūjā*) done since my childhood. My mothers (female relatives) used to do the *brata* of Śani god. They do it on Saturdays. Then they fast and go to make *pūjā*.

Reha's quote introduces the god Śani, an all-purpose protective deity as well as a deity of well-being and harmony. In Reha's view, Śani is similar to Kālī, but Kālī was not required for his worship. Instead, Reha approached Śani directly. She called the *brata* of Śani by the name of a weekday. For her, fasting on Saturdays was a celebration of Śani. She listed several wishes she wanted fulfilled by observing Saturday (the *brata* of Śani); among these wishes the unquestionable priority was given to her children.

Most women earnestly believed that faithful and dedicated devotion of protective deities would rescue their family from evil effects. Worship and preventive activities gave women confidence that they were doing something to protect their family. If something unfortunate happened, however, it rarely made people doubtful of the protective deity or ritual. Instead, most thought that had they given up worshipping the protective deity, the situation would have been even worse. By following protective observances they had likely avoided a greater disaster.

### 5.3.3 Seeking a cure for a sick child

#### Understanding the conceptions of sickness and health

Despite the great efforts taken to assure protection, it is obviously unavoidable that people fall ill and require care and treatment. In the fieldwork sites most families took great efforts in seeking a cure for their sick children and family members. During the interviews many became distraught when recalling their memories of diseases, treatments, losses, and cures. Before moving on to the various cures, it is best to first discuss my interviewees' conceptions of health and disease. Who is ill and on what grounds, is a culturally specific matter that people learn from the surrounding community. Similarly, the treatments are based on an understanding of the origin of the disease or anomaly.

In the research communities, people knew many ways to treat diseases. The majority of the interviewees had some access – for many quite limited – to clinical doctors, but no one relied on them alone. Some women were critical of modern medicine, an obvious consequence of their traditional conceptions concerning illness. For most interviewees, diseases were thought to be

caused by exterior evil that threatens human lives by attacking people's bodies, or by a disorder originating from neglecting to maintain ritual purity and proper ritual conduct. Diseases were also believed to be a result of the unfavourable position of celestial beings (planets, stars, and moon), of sins committed in a present or past life, or of an imbalance in the humours of a person's body. Most interviewees had only an elementary knowledge of viruses, bacteria, and the spreading of diseases. Their ideas about illness were strongly influenced by traditional beliefs. A good example of this was that even if women knew the ailment was caused by unclean drinking water, they could nevertheless treat the illness as though it were caused by an evil spirit.

According to a common Indian folk belief, some diseases such as epilepsy, hysteria, and any disease with dyskinesia are typically believed to be the effects of evil spirits.[633] Women claimed that the work of evil spirits was best identified by the way the disease struck a person: A sudden, unexpected illness was believed to be a clear sign of an outside evil encounter. In the Bengali language there is a term that can be translated as a science of the diseases caused by evil spirits (*bhūtatattva*).[634] Assuming the disease was caused by an evil spirit entering the human body, it was logical to think that the curing of the disease required frightening or exorcizing the evil away.[635] In a similar vein, if the origin of the disease was believed to be the imbalance in body humours, the cure was naturally to restore the balance in one way or other.

The most often mentioned evil entities among the women interviewed were the evil eye and *bhūta,* a 'ghost' or 'phantom'.[636] *Bhūtas* were thought to disturb people by entering and possessing human bodies against their will, and causing them to fall ill. According to a common belief, *bhūtas* are restless ghosts of those who have died an unnatural death. They may be stillborn or departed children, or people who have died in accidents or suicides, or those who have been denied proper funeral rites. It is thought that they have come to demand their rights and to accomplish what they left undone.[637]

Harijan Basti interviewee Reha had lost four children at a very early stage of their lives. She believed that one of her sons was taken by an evil spirit:[638]

> My child died. He was caught by an evil spirit (*hāoyā lāgā)*. Evil spirit fell on him (*hāoyā paṛā)*. He was taken by an evil spirit (*bhūta*). We say that an evil spirit fell on him. He was five months old. I gave him food. […] He had breast milk, but he died. When he was weak, I went to see a homeopath. I told that all my children have been healthy, but

[633] Maity 1988, 83.

[634] Biswas 2000.

[635] On exorcism rituals see, for example, Kapur 1988, 82–122.

[636] Blanchet 1984, 50–55; Chaki 2007, 718. In Bengali dictionaries *bhūta* is given various references. It is a class of supernatural beings that attend to Śiva, but it is also 'a genie', 'a bogey', 'an evil spirit', 'a creature', 'a goblin' (Biswas 2000).

[637] Blanchet 1984, 53; Karim 1988, 283.

[638] Reha was interviewed in Harijan Basti on 18 March 2004.

> why is this one weak since his birth. […] After that I gave him medicine and he got healthy. When he got healthy, he died.

In the first three sentences Reha explains the way most people believed evil disturbs human beings. Her son was caught by an evil spirit; the spirit fell on him; and he was taken by an evil spirit. The evil spirit was clearly understood to be a real entity that acted purposefully. At the beginning of the quote Reha claimed that her son died because of the evil spirit. Why she thought that does not become evident until the end. Reha finished by saying "when he got healthy, he died". The death of a healthy person did not make sense, and therefore, was thought to be caused by an evil spirit.

Even if the women interviewed did not necessarily share a collective understanding of the evil realm, evil spirits were believed to be the most important source of illness and misfortune in individual lives. Women were not very eager to discuss their ideas about the evil realm, which may be explained by the taboos concerning pronouncing the names of evil entities. In Hindu traditions, calling the name of a deity is believed to engender and awaken the power of the deity. Similarly, calling the name of an evil spirit may be understood as an invitation to the spirit. Dealing with evil was left by choice to the specialists.

### Specialists in healing

Similar to most slum areas in Kolkata, sanitary conditions in the research neighbourhoods were poor. People were exposed to dirt and human filth – fertile soil for the spreading of infections. Small children were particularly at risk since they would pick things up directly from the ground and put them into their mouths. When someone fell ill, family members discoursed about the possible cause of the ailment and decided on the action to take. For most, it was customary to first turn to family deities for help. People gave vows and promises (*mānasika*) and offered *pūjās* for the cure of the sick. Some went to clinical doctors but many turned to traditional healers and magicians. Harijan Basti interviewee Bali told about the plan she was going to follow if her children fell ill or if she doubted an evil influence:[639]

> We go to *ojhā* (exorcist). He blows from his mouth (*jhāṛa-phuṅka*) on a child. *Ojhā* gives water, and we give it (to the child) to drink. If that does not help I show him (the child) to a *gunina*, and if that does not help, I show him to a doctor. […] When the *ojhā* blows from his mouth, the child will be well. If an evil spirit has caused the illness the child will be fine. If there is a more stubborn evil spirit, we have to ask a *gunina* to see the child.

In the above quote, Bali mentions *ojhā* and *gunina,* the two most popular curing specialists recognized by the interviewed. Their assistance was sought equally in all three communities. People visited also *pir*, *phakir, kabirāja, bediya,* astrologers, and various other holy men and women

[639] Bali was interviewed in Harijan Basti on 9 February 2004.

who they believed possessed healing powers, or whose techniques helped in curing illnesses. In casual talk, most interviewees called the traditional healers and magicians as *Bābās* (fathers), and some women did not even make a distinction between the different healers.[640] My informants never identified the healers by proper names; instead, they called them by their professional title.

According to Karim, who has studied shamanism in Bangladesh, there are two types of traditional healing: shamanism or magico-religious healing and natural or herbal healing.[641] Magico-religious healing employs magic, charms, holy words, and action, whereas natural healing utilizes herbs, plants, minerals, and animal substances in the treatments. These rough categories do not, however, exclude one another: Shamans may use plants and herbalists charms.

The popular magico-religious healers such as *ojhā, gunina* and *pir* are of Muslim origin. None of the three communities participating in this study had much interaction with the Muslims otherwise and there were no signs that they had adopted other religious practices or beliefs of Muslim traditions; yet, the Muslim holy men were well-known and trusted for their skills in healing. Interestingly, my single Muslim interviewee said that she did not go to Muslim healers for treatments since she did not believe in the evil eye. Most interviewees, however, went to the mosques and met Muslim curers there. Occasionally the *Bābās* came round to neighbourhoods to consult people there. Harijan Basti interviewee Pho experienced a miraculous cure of her son when she took him to a Muslim healer:[642]

> *Bābā pir*, his work is really true. I really mean it. One may believe it or not. My youngest son was about to die and we took him to *Bābā pir*, and he survived. Muslims have Muhammadan scholars (*maulabi*) in *dargahs* where they do their *pūjās*.[643] Their priest (*purohita*) *ojhā* comes often, exorcizes evil spirits by blowing from the mouth (*jhāṛa-phuṅka*), and pours charmed oil (*tela-paṛā*) while reciting incantations.

Most of the Muslim healers in Bengal belong to various sects of the Sufi order. According to Bengali literature the cult of *pirs* was already established in the region during mediaeval times. There is debate about the origin of the cult, but no doubt it has developed in close interaction with local Hindu traditions. Some Bengali Hindus even consider *pirs* as tantric gurus or teachers of the Śākta order.[644] Their veneration has many similarities with the offering of *pūjā* to Hindu gods. Pho demonstrated how the two religious traditions had merged in the popular mind. She called the Muslim rituals *pūjās* and the Muslim excorcist *purohita*. In general, people consult *pirs* for mystic guidance and for the treatment of various disorders and diseases including spirit

[640] Some women called Hindu priests (*purohita*) also by the name *Bābā,* and a male guru was frequently referred to as *Bābā.* As already mentioned, the different forms of the male divinity Śiva were also often called as *Bābās.*

[641] Karim 1988, 280.

[642] Pho was interviewed in Harijan Basti on 4 March 2004.

[643] *Dargah* is a tomb, a shrine, or mosque erected on the grave of a *pir*, Sufi saint (Maity 1989, 115).

[644] Maity 1989, 116.

possession. *Pirs* are also believed to be able to cure infertility. Their healing treatments usually include words from the Quran, charms, amulets, and traditional medicine.[645]

The two other important Muslim healers include *phakirs* and *ojhās*, who, similar to *pirs,* have a Sufi background, although neither of them occupy as high a position in the society as *pirs*. Among my interviewees, *phakirs* were most commonly considered as exorcists of evils. According to Janbazar interviewee Praba, "when we suspect a child of having fallen under evil influence (*najara*), we visit *phakirs* who exorcize the evil forces".[646]

The term *phakir* derives from Arabic and means 'poor'. Most Bengali *phakirs* are ascetics from the low economic strata of the society.The term *phakir* is generally used for one who leads a religious life, but in the course of history it has suffered an inflation and nowadays it often denotes a street beggar who chants holy names and verses, yet does not show much spiritual progression.[647] This decrease in value did not seem to bother the people belonging to the studied communities. Many of them respected and believed in the *phakirs'* magical powers and ability to ward off evils.

Several interviewees (see, for example, Bali's quote earlier in the chapter), the women of Harijan Basti in particular, said that they occasionally visited *ojhās*.[648] *Ojhā* usually comes from a *phakir* community, yet there are also Hindu *ojhās*, who belong to low caste peasant communities.[649] Most of the *ojhās* that were consulted by my informants resided in mosques and were affiliated with the Muslim community. The main occupation of *ojhās* used to be healing of snake bites. My interviewees, however, turned to *ojhās* mainly to get rid of evils that were thought to cause various diseases, and for protection from the evil eye. Similar to *phakirs, ojhās* were believed to be able to exorcize evil spirits and ghosts. According to McDaniel, even if the *ojhās* occasionally perform sacrificial rituals on behalf of their customers, they are in fact exorcists.[650] As has become clear from the above quotes the most common folk cures the *ojhās* performed for my interviewees were the blowing of healing breath on a patient (*jhāṛa-phuṅka*), and the pouring of oil or water (*tela-paṛā* or *jala-paṛā*) while reciting charms and incantation.[651] The methods *ojhās* use in warding off evils can be physically painful, for it is assumed that the possessed person cannot feel pain, only the ghost can. Karim maintains that many people believe that if the

[645] Karim 1988, 280; Maity 1989, 114–116, 122–123.

[646] Praba was interviewed in Janbazar on 11 February and 5 March 2004.

[647] Karim 1988, 281.

[648] Karim suggests that the word *ojhā* derives from a Turkish term *hodja,* a Muslim priest and teacher who conducts various religious ceremonies. They are considered to have supernatural healing powers and the control over armies of evil (Karim 1988, 281).

[649] In many Indian languages *ojhā* refers to an upper class Brahman. The term is also a surname of some Brahman castes.

[650] McDaniel 1989, 8, 13.

[651] McDaniel 1989, 13. The verb *jhāṛā* can be translated as 'to beat out', 'to dust off', 'to shake off' or 'to exorcize', and *phuṅkā* as 'to blow with the mouth' or 'to smoke' (Chaki 2007, 388, 627).

*ojhā* is offended he may inflict disease or carry out some mischief.[652] The fear of the *ojhā* may also derive from the experiences of painful sessions with the exorcist. Nowadays the modern portrait of the *ojhā*, produced by the movie and television industry, is a stereotyped *ojhā*, a human with superpowers controlling evil entities.

Besides the actual curing treatments, the healers often gave the women interviewed advice on how to deal with illness. Usually this included wearing amulets or powerful articles, taking traditional medicines, or following certain restrictions. Most women observed the advice religiously. Neglecting it, they thought, could potentially cause even worse evil. Some women, however, doubted the effectiveness of the healing treatments and magical cures.

While the treatmensts of magico-religious healers were more popular, women also went to see herbal and natural healers, mainly *kabirāja* or *bediya*. According to Karim, neither of them, however, are purely natural healers, since they also use magico-religious methods such as spells and amulets, especially for illnesses they believe are caused by evil spirits.[653] As discussed previously, *kabirāja* is used to restore the balance between the three body humours. Among my interviewees, *kabirāja* treatments were more often used for adults suffering from various disorders than for children, whose illnesses were often thought to be the result of evil spirits. A few of my Ganti interviewees mentioned that they had consulted a *bediya. Bediyas* belong to vagrant syncretic gypsy and nomadic groups.[654] They profess to be Muslims, but also worship some Hindu gods. Members of these communities often engage in magic, snake charming, and monkey shows. *Bediya* healers are mainly women who use herbs and animal substances to cure diseases, especially nervous and rheumatic pain. Ganti interviewee Alo suffered from arthritis and had consulted a *bediya,* but she was disappointed since no healer could cure her illness:[655]

> I have gone to the doctor*, kabirāja, ojhā, bediya*, and taken medicine, but the pain is no less. I have it and my daughter has it, and it is very painful.

In the course of the fieldwork it occurred to me that many in the research neighbourhoods were eager to seek a cure from a variety of healers and methods. They went from one healer or method to another, spending a great deal of money, and did not hesitate to try purely magical methods. Some were disappointed, but the majority were convinced that they had been helped by one method or another.

[652] Karim 1988, 281.

[653] Karim 1988, 282.

[654] Karim 1988, 282.

[655] Alo was interviewed in Ganti on 11 March 2004.

## Stories of possessions and miraculous cures

Even though consulting different healers was highly popular and the public admired their powers and skills, the healers did not unseat the deities who were also believed to be important agents in healing the sick. My interviewees recalled several stories of miraculous cures in which the healing was believed to be the work of a deity who acted through the possession (*bhara hoyā*) of a human agent.[656] Women told that occasionally the spirit of a deity entered someone's body and the possessed person mediated the deity's message and advice to others. Many had experienced that when in need of a cure (or any help) the deity had addressed them directly through the possessed. In most cases the possessed person was a devotee of the deity but she or he could also be anyone the deity or the community selected. Unlike possessions by evil entities, being possessed by the spirit of a deity was usually a hoped-for state, even though it occasionally happened involuntarily. Most women both in Ganti and in Harijan Basti told that they had witnessed several occasions of possessions, whereas women in Janbazar were not aware of any possessions taking place in their neighbourhood. In most descriptions the possessed person inspired awe or even fear, but the encounter was interpreted as having a positive influence. It was thought to provide guidance and to bring relief in critical situations. Harijan Basti interviewee Bali described the possession of her son as follows:[657]

> When it (the spirit) came into the body, his body went relaxed. How it happened, I did not understand. While he (son) was playing (with his child), he went relaxed upto his head. When it happened, what a situation it was! His eyes turned upside down. When the *bhara* came, what a creature he turned out to be. I mean, his eyes swelled. I was really afraid of him and ran away. […] He really had a frightening appearance. He had the same kind of mouth as Mā (Kālī).

Even though possessions could sometimes occur without warning, they were mainly expected during certain feasts and *pūjās,* especially during Kālī and Mā Śītalā worship since they were the most common deities identified with possession. According to most women, possession incidents were times to ask the spirit of a deity (*bhara*) advice, especially in cases of illness. Banu described the coming of the *bhara* as follows:[658]

> When we have *pūjā* here, the *bhara* comes, yet mainly during Śītalā pūjā. *Bhara* comes to both women and men according to its liking. People ask the *bhara* questions and it gives answers. They ask questions like will my children stay well and will my husband get a good job.

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[656] *Bhara* refers to 'weight', 'pressure', but also to 'domination' and 'possession'. The only translation given to *bhara hoyā* is 'to be possessed' (Biswas 2000). Among my interviewees the term *bhara* was often used as a synonym for 'the spirit of the deity'.

[657] Bali was interviewed in Harijan Basti on 9 February 2004.

[658] Banu was interviewed in Harijan Basti on 10 March 2004.

In the community celebrations of Mā Śītalā in the Harijan Basti neighbourhood, the climax of most feasts was the Śītalā spirit entering someone's body. In these incidents, people expected the possessions as part of the rituals. One typical case of possession occurred during my fieldwork when the Harijan Basti community was celebrating *pūjā* for Mā Śītalā on the third consecutive Tuesday preceding their main Śītalā feast. The women had prepared offerings and observed fasting for the whole day. The ceremony started in the afternoon and was held at the Śītalā shrine by the banyan tree. The participants were mainly women, yet, the celebrant – the one conducting the rite – was an elderly man, a member of the community. As the ceremony started I was told by women that the *bhara* would come into the body of the celebrant. People seemed to expect that he was the one who would be possessed by the deity. The man was clearly prepared for the incident. He had flowers and small bells tied to a thread hanging around his waist and neck. He was swinging a red stick, which had feathers at the tip of it. During the whole ceremony he kept stepping back and forth while swinging the stick. First, he lit a match and put it into his mouth. He behaved as though he was intoxicated, yet totally conscious of what he was doing. Two male and two female assistants helped him conduct the drama. The celebrant took two chickens which had been brought to the temple and gave them to a female assistant, who by her gestures showed respect for the possessed man. The celebrant and his assistants performed a play of ritual sacrifice in which the celebrant lifted up one of the frightened looking female assistants and drew a vermilion line on her neck. Then the assistants cut the necks of the chicken, and gave one head to the celebrant, who sucked the blood from it. Then the man drank water and again lit a match, and sucked the second chicken head, sprinkling the blood on his cheeks. As he finished sucking, he suddenly screamed loudly. After the sacrificial play, the celebrant went on walking – still continuously stepping back and forth – among the observers and swinging the stick. He pointed at some people with a stick. They kept asking him questions and fearfully listened to him. The celebrant also came to me and asked if I had a problem. He said that there was a problem in my family. He handed me one flower from the garland and suggested I keep it under my head when sleeping. After advising people the celebrant left the crowd, and returned to the temple later, acting normally. After this possession ritual, women went to take a bath, performed Śītalā pūjā and shared the offered food (*prasāda*) with one another. The chickens were returned to those who had brought them, who then prepared a meal and had them as *prasāda*.[659]

This incident could be called an institutionalized possession.[660] The procedure was known beforehand, and everything happened accordingly – unlike spontaneous possessions in which the situation is uncontrolled. In the institutionalized version the deity possesses only the person who has status; or the reverse, possession gives that person status. Whatever the case, possession is a sign of power and position. The sacrificial drama is planned beforehand and acted according to the script. In the above story, the celebrant implied a human sacrifice by drawing vermilion on the woman's neck. Yet a chicken was substituted for the woman. By receiving the blood sacrificethe celebrant acted the part of a deity. For the public, the most essential part of the drama was the consultation with the possessed person. They asked the *bhara* of Mā Śītalā for advice and

[659] Fieldwork diary, 1 October 2003.

[660] Kapadia 1996, 130–137.

help with their problems, which mainly concerned cures for the various illnesses that were considered the domain of the goddess.

Women told that the advice of the *bhara* usually involved demands of sacrifice and fidelity as well as maintenance of purity; but the advice also included practical and even rational suggestions as regards the treatment of the ill. The *bhara* could, for instance, advise someone to take a sick person to a doctor, but the instruction could also be vague and without clear connection to the actual state of affairs. Ganti informants said that possessions occurred mainly among women, but in Harijan Basti there was no difference between the sexes; both men and women became possessed. In the following quote Ganti interviewee Sada tells about her experiences with *bharas*:[661]

> There are two *bharas* here in Ganti. They are *bharas* of Kālī god (*ṭhākura*). One is Śoṣaṇa Kālī and the other Mā Tārā.[662] They come to some ladies. When we give *pūjās* and dress in clean clothes then the *bhara* comes. People ask the *bhara* why he/she has come. The *bhara* once said that you have to give fruit. I gave (the deity) fruit in my name. After that the *bhara* told me what will happen to me. Once I took my son with me. The *bhara* adviced what to do. At that time my son had fever. I was ordered to clean up everything and the *bhara* asked me to get water of the Ganges. Then I did what the *bhara* had asked me to do. […] In the morning the fever had gone. I did not give my son any medicine. He was playing and eating well.

Sada did not reveal anything about the possessed persons, except that the *bhara* came to some ladies. The identity of the possessed did not seem to matter. Sada seemed to think that she was communicating directly with the goddess. The possession incidents Sada described were not fully spontaneous, as seen from the *bhara'*s order to wear clean clothes. People usually dressed in new clothes only for the more important feasts. The requirement of purity was also emphasized: Sada had to clean up everything and even fetch water of the Ganges, probably in order to sprinkle it around her house, and to give it as an offering to the goddess. Sada was convinced that by following the instructions of the deity's spirit, her son had been cured of the fever. She even mentioned that she had not given her son any medicine.

In the healing accounts, the *bhara* often suggested that women should give a vow or promise (*mānasika*) in the name of a deity. The practice was thought to not only please the deity but also to prove the fidelity of the devotee, and thus, contribute to the hoped-for result. When Ganti interviewee Juri's son was suffering from fever, the local doctor could not help him. In the first part of the narrative Juri elaborates the difficult situation and pressure she faced from other family members. She took care of her son, pouring water on him continuously to cool him

[661] Sada was interviewed in Ganti on 1 March 2004.

[662] Śoṣaṇa Kālī is one of the many local forms of Mā Kālī, and Mā Tārā is the second Mahāvidyā, a dark goddess resembling Mā Kālī in appearance and nature (Kinsley 2003, 9, 92).

down, but the fever did not come down. When the family was planning to take him to a distant doctor, Juri told that the goddess Mā Kālī herself had come to instruct her in what to do:[663]

> My son got fever and I took him to a doctor, but the doctor did not care, not at all. […] Then (the spirit of) Mā Kālī came and said, make *mānasika* in my name, but before that, immerse yourself in the pond. […] Your son will be fine immediately. When he goes to the doctor, your son will be fine.

The above quote is a typical story of a deity intervening in a critical situation. Juri did not mention the possessed person. She spoke of Mā Kālī as though the goddess directly approached her. She had said elsewhere that "I do not have guru, but Kālī comes to speak to me".[664] For her son to be cured the deity recommended Juri (not the son) to take a dip in the pond, which clearly indicated the requirement of purity of a devotee. But more than anything, the deity demanded the loyalty of Juri in the form of *mānasika.* Juri told that she was very busy keeping the promises she had made. She had given a promise when worried about her son not socializing with other boys and when the body of her son was infected and he was hitting his leg with a stick. She was also planning to give *mānasika* for one of her sons' brain disease. Juri admitted that she had difficulties in fulfilling all the vows and promises she had made and felt guilty about it. She told about incidents of Mā Kālī demanding repayment of her debts:

> When Mā Kālī came to me, she said, why did you not give *mānasika*? I said, see Mother, I do not have money, but I will fast and give you *mānasika.*

During her interview Juri did not tell if her devotion actually facilitated the health of her sons or not, yet she claimed that "if there is illness of some kind, I make *mānasika* and they (sons) will be fine again". She was either so convinced of success that she had no need to emphasize the results, or, the outcome did not matter to her; she received sufficient consolation from the faithful observance of her practice.

As mentioned earlier, several women frequently observed *mānasika* to fulfil their desires. Some acted on the basis of the advice of the *bhara,* while some decided independently to promote the hoped-for results whenever they faced challenges. In cases of sick children, mothers spared no effort to make their children well again. This is what was told by Ganti interviewee Mila when her son had an eye infection:[665]

> I made *mānata* with such passion (*sādha*). My son had an eye infection. First he got measles (*hāma*) and then one of his eyes got infected. It watered all the time. I made *mānata* to Mother that if she will heal the eye of my son I give the deity a donation in return. I promised to give a silver eye. When the price was set, I told it to others and

[663] Juri was interviewed in Ganti on 11 March 2004.

[664] The experience of Juri resembles the story of Ganti interviewee Pura, who had an encounter with goddess Mā Kalmiki.

[665] Mila was interviewed in Ganti on 28 January 2004.

> made *mānata.* Within two or three days the eye of my son was healed. My son was playing again. The eye was not watering anymore. The following year I fulfilled my promise with great passion. I gave (the goddess) three silver eyes.

In Mila's quote, the logic of making *mānasika* is evident, and it illustrates the reciprocity of the gift exchange. Mila was worried about her son's watering eye and appealed to a deity – probably Mā Kālī or Mā Śītalā – to heal the eye. In exchange, she fixed the price of a silver eye as a condition for her son's recovery. Previously in this study we learned about a family who were hoping for a child, and promised to donate a golden doll to the deity if their wish was granted. According to the citation, Mila chose to make the promise public, as if she wanted people to agree about the price. Most women did not, however, want to expose their vows openly, and some kept their promises to themselves. As Mila's son recovered soon after the *mānasika,* Mila was convinced that the healing resulted from her devotion. She was so relieved and happy that she later surpassed her promise and gave the goddess a total of three silver eyes. Obviously this generosity had more to it than sheer gratitude. It established the status of her family. Success was seen partly as a personal achievement, and within their community, they were considered respectful people whom the goddess favoured. Mila was a minor religious authority as she performed rituals for those women who came to fetch god effigies from her husband.

Despite their efforts, all were not lucky enough to have their desires and wishes immediately granted. It was slightly shameful for a family to admit that illnesses were not cured. People had a tendency to think that misfortune was due to some personal fault or sin, lack of purity or proper ritual conduct. Harijan Basti interviewee Sule had a mentally retarded daughter and she had put great effort into seeking a cure for the disorder:[666]

> I have gone to far away places for my daughter. […] I have gone to so many gods (*ṭhākura*) because of her. […] I went to these places with some other people. They said that here is a good god, if you see the god, she or he will tell you what to do, and your daughter will be cured after some time. I have gone with so many people. But nothing happened. That is why I do not believe in any one of them. I am not going anywhere. I am keeping one god (*ṭhākura*). Whether this god cures my daughter or not it is according to its will. And that is it.

Sule was obviously disappointed and frustrated, because nothing seemed to help her daughter. She had followed many people of good will and promises. Finally, she concluded that she would not continue seeking a healer or god any longer, but left the decision to her personal favourite god (*iṣṭadebatā*). As I returned to the field in 2008 Sule's daughter's condition was the same as before and she was yet unmarried, which troubled her family a great deal. She had passed the proper marriageable age and her future was completely open. Sule and her husband were obliged to take responsibility for their daughter as long as they lived.

[666] Sule was interviewed in Harijan Basti on 29 January 2004.

The healing narratives of my interviewees indicate that in the women's opinion recovery required both human and divine impact. As mothers and parents they believed that they had the responsibility to seek a cure for their sick children. Whatever method they applied, most of them were ready to allow the treatments, give vows, and devote time and money in exchange for children being cured. Healing followed the same logic of reciprocal exchange of gifts as most of their ritual activities did.

### *Tīrtha-yātrā*: pilgrimages for the child

In all corners of the India, there are sites that are distinguished from the profane and marked as sacred. Similar to most Hindus my interviewees took cognisance of the sacred geography surrounding their region.[667] The sacred places – generally referred to as *tīrthas* – are usually located by a water source, river, lake, pond, or well that people believe has purifying power. The originating myths of these sacred places are often connected to the great Indian epics, yet spiced with local mythologies. Pilgrimage journeys or processions are generally known as *tīrtha-yātrās.* According to common Hindu thought, going on a *tīrtha-yātrā* increases a person's merit (*puṇya*) and removes bad karma.[668]

*Tīrtha* is thought to be the place for a pilgrim's spiritual crossing, but also the place where the god or gods are believed to have come down into this world as *abatāras*, divine descents of gods.[669] Each sacred Hindu site has one or more chief deities or saints, who govern it and fill the major seats in the temples and shrines. A number of others are related to the chief deities in some way and occupy minor seats. Pilgrims come to commune with the chief or one of the minor deities depending on their preference and business, and may consult several on specific issues.

Many pilgrimage resorts have a distinct character, meaning that the site may offer a particular blessing, or specialize in certain cultic activities, or, that there are particular rules of conduct to be followed in order for pilgrims to benefit from the journey. For example, a holy site may attract pilgrims hoping for a child or those seeking a cure for a certain disease. Some sites are also known as auspicious places for performing last rites for the deceased (*śrāddha karā*), and people come for that very purpose. Pilgrims might be expected to have fasted for a period of time and to

[667] Going on a pilgrimage is a practice that extends to all the layers of Hindu society, and is growing in popularity. More and more Indians can afford to travel and many of them head to sacred sites. 'Sacred sight-seeing' has become an important form of tourism and some sacred places have evolved into major tourist complexes, which attract masses of visitors coming for different reasons and with different intentions. Pilgrimage tourism has become a massive business, which does not lack economic and commercial influences (Eck, 1982, 20; Eck 1998, 64–65; Karttunen 2010, 136). Parts of this chapter are published elsewhere (see Uuksulainen 2010).

[668] *Tīrtha* is a Sanskrit term literally meaning 'ford' and 'crossing place'. In general it is understood to be a metaphor for a sacred place where one can cross over to the shore of liberation. *Tīrthas* as thresholds between heaven and earth are believed to be charged with power and purity which afford a spiritual crossing. Various *tīrthas* are focuses of devotion and pilgrimage (*tīrtha-yātrā*) throughout India (Bakker 1990, 1; Bhardwaj 1973, 1–2; Bowker 1997, 982; Chakrabarti 1984, 115; Eck 1982, 34–35; Eck 1997, 138; Karttunen 2010, 132–133; Olson 2007, 129–130; Saraswati 1983, 1–8; van der Veer 1989, 1–2).

[669] Eck 1998, 68.

be wearing special clothes, and to bring with them gifts that are favourable for a given deity. Such details are many and vary according to the site.

According to the interviewees, people set out on a pilgrimage in the first place to show their loyalty to and support of the deity or deities residing at the site, and to call on the deity to respond to their prayers. Many said that they had gone to fulfil promises they had previously made and to receive the blessings of the deity. Pilgrimage was also thought to be a form of compensation for committed sins (*pāpa*). It was to show repentance and to become purified from a polluted condition. One of the most important motives was to come to see (*darśana*) the idol of the deity, which many believed had greater powers than the average effigies in minor temples.[670] Many emphasized the importance of physical contact with the deity's image and some sensation of its presence – seeing, touching, and handing over offerings. It was common to refer to a pilgrimage as a visit to the deity. This is how Harijan Basti interviewee Bali gives reasons for her pilgrimage to Dakshineswar:[671]

> I have been to Dakshineswar. I go once a year to see Mā. When I go I take a bath in the Ganges and give *pūjā*.[672]

Most of the women interviewed had visited one or more pilgrimage places around the region. In most cases the pilgrimage was planned well ahead and took place during major festivals and at various significant crossroads in life. Occasionally it was spontaneous if something unexpected came up or if people wanted approval and a blessing for their decisions. In what follows Harijan Basti interviewees Reha, Ru, and Boti tell about their pilgrimage practices:[673]

> I go to Jagannath (temple) in Puri.[674] When my son gets married then I will go. It is good for me to go since there is *mukti*.[675] […] When children are born, especially male, then I will go to Puri. (Reha)
>
> We have been to Dakshineswar several times. We go when we have free time. When a baby is born in our house I go to take a bath in the river Ganges. (Ru)

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[670] The act of going on a pilgrimage in the Bengali language is, among other terms, called as *tīrtha-darśana*, literally 'seeing the sacred place' (Biswas 2000).

[671] Bali was interviewed in Harijan Basti on 9 February 2004.

[672] The famous Dakshineswar Kālī temple is located on the banks of the river Hoogley in Kolkata. Mā refers to goddess Mā Kālī.

[673] Reha was interviewed on 18 March 2004, Ru on 2 December 2003, and Boti on 5 February 2004.

[674] The temple complex of Jagannath in Puri (Orissa) is a popular pilgrimage site of Hindus (worshippers of Kṛṣṇa and Viṣṇu in particular) and attracts pilgrims from all over India. Jagannath hosts yearly a famous chariot festival, Rath Yātrā.

[675] *Mukti* is a Hindu theological concept, which is usually translated as 'salvation', 'freedom from earthly attachments', 'release', 'extrication', 'deliverance'or 'discharge' (Biswas 2000). It is difficult to assess what Reha meant exactly when she referred to *mukti,* but as I previously mentioned, a sacred site (*tīrtha*) is thought to be a place for crossing over to the shore of liberation.

> I went to Puri, to Konark temple.[676] […] The dog bit my son, and when he got a little better I went to Puri with him. (Boti)

A common reason for setting out on a pilgrimage for most interviewees was a life-cycle event such as birth, marriage, and death. A pilgrimage was often considered in terms of preparation for a new phase of life or the ending of the previous phase: for example, many women followed the custom of ending the period of impurity following childbirth by taking a bath by the holy site. The pilgrimage served general purposes such as the health and security of the family, but also personal ends such as success in business or finding a decent husband, or warding off the influence of evil spirits.

Women travelled either with family members or in a group with other women. Occasionally they walked alone and joined other pilgrims on the way. Several women made a point to mention that it was their independent decision to set out on a pilgrimage, and some even went against the wishes of the family. Pilgrimages were rare opportunities for women to move out of the domestic sphere into a wider world. During the pilgrimage most women followed a strict regime and fasting. If the distance was reasonable they went on foot, believing that the suffering and hardship endured on the way was a merit. Many liked to boast about the difficulties, and believed that the more adversities there were, the greater the benefits and positive effects. Yet, some women that said they went on a pilgrimage for no special reason, and enjoyed the journey as a form of recreation. Harijan Basti interviewee Pho told that she had no specific motive for going on a pilgrimage:[677]

> Once I went to Tarakeswar Śiva temple. […] I went carrying a bent yoke-pole (*bāṅka*) on my shouders.[678] I went walking and took water with me. I went because I wanted to. I went with those people with whom I had fun. I also gave *pūjā* for god (*ṭhākura*). I went because I really wanted to go. I did not go because of a promise (*mānasika*) I had made. Yet many people go because they have vowed to do so.

Most women believed that visiting sacred places and paying homage to their deities was an auspicious activity and benefited the pilgrim and her family. They clearly demonstrated the ideas of reciprocity and the exchange of gifts between the pilgrim and deity. The gifts they offered and the hardships they endured on the way to the pilgrimage site were thought to influence the deity and be rewarded. Some of the rewards they believed would be worldly and immediate and others of an eternal nature. The promises and vows they had made in the name of the deity at the holy site largely concerned the health and prosperity of their children and other family members.

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[676] Konark is a small town in the Puri district, in Orissa. It is the site of the famous temple of the sun god (Sūrya), built in the 13th century, and nominated as a World Heritage Site.

[677] Pho was interviewed in Harijan Basti on 4 March 2004.

[678] *Bāṅka* refers to a long and bent piece of yoke-pole borne on one's shoulder for carrying loads fastened to its ends (Biswas 2000). Carrying water at the end of *bāṅka* is a typical custom of Śaiva pilgrims during the festivals of Gājan and Śrābaṇi in particular. They bring water to the holy sites to pour it on the Śivaliṅga, the phallic symbol of god Śiva. In Tarakeswar the water is poured on the image of Tāraknāth. The water should be taken from sacred water sources, the Ganges or its tributaries (Chakrabarti 1984, 69, 73, and 129).

Typical promises were made in the hope of giving birth to a healthy son, to ensure the well-being of a husband or child, and to find a cure for their illnesses. Harijan Basti interviewee Boti described her motives for going on a pilgrimage:[679]

> I made a vow (*brata*) to Bābā of Tarakeswar. I promised (gave a *mānata*) that if I had a son I would go (there) with *bāṅka*. If I had a son I would take him and bring there his clotted hair. Bābā, I was so happy going there with my son! […] When my son turned five years old I fulfilled the promise. I went to Bābā with my son. I left my son's clotted hair at the Bābā. My son was fasting with me. He did not eat anything. He said I will eat only when we have given water to the Bābā. I had promised to give Bābā a golden eye. I had also flowers and water with me. […] I went there on foot. My son and husband came by car. I went alone on foot from Sheoraphuli to Tarakeswar carrying the *bāṅka* along with me.[680] I poured water on Bābā's head and left my son's hair, and then we came back home. I had promised to do so. […] Then I made another promise. I said that when my son turns twelve I will take him to Bābā, with *bāṅka* of course.

The idea of the exchange is evident in this quotation. Boti had given a promise: if she were granted a son she would fulfil her part when the child was five years old. She had promised to set out on the pilgrimage, endure the journey on foot, and fast on the way – all of which are immaterial gifts. She had also promised to bring material gifts including a golden eye, flowers, and water. In addition, Boti had brought some of her son's hair, a usual custom of families wishing to seek protection for their newborn children.[681] The golden eye was referred to as *dāna,* a gift given in order to persuade the deity.[682] In Boti's case, gold – an expensive gift – was a sign of devotion and profound desire. In practice the gifts are given to Brahmans who officiate at the rituals, and who are generally considered gods in their own right and intermediaries between the supernatural and the human world.[683] Women told that Brahmans are paid for their services. The fee for Brahmans is generally known as *dakṣiṇā.*[684] Women never mentioned that the offerings were given de facto to a Brahman. As they saw it, the gifts were given to a deity, though mediated through a Brahman.

When Boti had fulfilled her vow she immediately made a new promise to return to the pilgrimage site with gifts for the deity when her son was twelve. This was to guarantee that the deity would continue to protect her son until then. In a way, Boti was negotiating with the

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[679] Boti gave her interview the 5th of February, 2004, in Harijan Basti.

[680] Sheoraphuli is fifty-five kilometres from Tarakeswar where most pilgrims make a stop. They fetch water from sacred Nimajtīrtha ghāṭa, a place thought to be sanctified by Lord Chaitanya (Chakrabarti 1984, 127).

[681] According to Chakrabarti, the ritual offering of hair (Mundana or Cula-deoyā) to Tāraknāth is common practice in Tarakeswar (Chakrabarti 1984, 68). The temple complex has tonsuring centres where mainly males come to perform this ritual for fulfilling their vows.

[682] Golden eye is considered as a very meaningful and valuable gift in the epic writing of *Skandapurāṇa.* It is written that by giving the golden eye the giver's eyesight will always remain clear (Acharya 1993, 173–174).

[683] van der Veer 1989, 200–201.

[684] See, for example, Acharya 1993, 2; Heim 2004, 118–119; Karttunen 2010, 139.

deity about the conditions of protection. Her interest was in the well-being of her son, and in exchange she agreed to make the pilgrimage and to bring gifts.

Most pilgrimage sites gather a range of religious professionals offering services to the pilgrims. There are priests – *paṇḍās, pūjāris,* and *purohitas* – 'ordained' on behalf of the temple to guide people around and to perform rituals for those visiting the sites.[685] Moreover a diversity of other religious specialists – holy men, healers, astrologists, exorcists, magicians – are consultated for both spiritual and practical guidance. Harijan Basti interviewee Boti had consulted a holy man – whom she did not identify in more detail – in Gayā, a famous pilgrimage site of both Hindus and Buddhists in the state of Bihar, and described the instruction given to her there:[686]

> Interviewer: You are wearing an amulet (*māduli*) around your neck; where is it from?
>
> Boti: This amulet is from Gayā. I went (there) to do the funeral offerings (*piṇḍadāna karā*) of my son, my in-laws, and family members.[687] […] I told there the story of my son and that I have no children. They asked how it happened. I told that my son died of fever. They asked if I had children. I told them that no, I do not have. Then they said that there is one holy fig tree (*pipala*) and that people make vows (*mānasika*) there. It was told that Sītā Mā or some deity gave *mānasika* there for her father-in-law Baikunṭha (god Viṣṇu).[688] That is why the *mānasika* is done there. If I get one more son I will go there again and give *pūjā.* That is sure. This thing (referring to her amulet) is of god (*ṭhākura*). They told me to wear this amulet which they had made of the holy tree. They also said to eat only vegetarian food on Tuesdays, to give *pūjā,* and to appeal to Mā. One year has gone. I have worn the amulet for one year. I will see what will happen now. I do have faith, there is faith left. One year has passed and nothing happened. I am wearing it and doing as they instructed on Tuesdays.

Journeying to the pilgrimage site was one way for Boti to contribute to the course of things, to do something instead of waiting to see what happens. It gave her hope and consolation. She was able to share her trauma of losing her children and was given supervision on how to continue dealing with it. Similar to Boti, the other interviewees also agreed that pilgrims usually returned

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[685] van der Veer 1989, 183.

[686] Boti was interviewed in Harijan Basti on 5 February 2004. Gayā is one of the seven sacred cities of Hindus, but plays a special role also for Jains and Buddhists. Gayā hosts a great number of temples and *ghāṭas* on the banks of the sacred Falgu river and around the sacred hilltops surrounding the city, all of them playing a role in the mythological story of Gayā. According to the myth, the name Gayā derives from a holy demon, Gayāsur, whom Lord Viṣṇu killed by stepping on his chest. Gayā is believed to be so holy that it has the power to absolve the sins of those who come to touch or look at it. Nowadays the most popular site in the city of Gayā is Viṣṇupad temple, which is believed to have a footprint of Viṣṇu incised in a block of basalt, marking the act of Lord Viṣṇu subjugating the demon. Most pilgrims come to Gayā to perform a funeral ceremony in honour of a deceased family member (*śrāddha*) and to absolve the sins of their ancestors. Bodh Gāya, the legendary site of the Bo tree under which the Buddha is believed to have gained final enlightenment, is located only about eleven kilometres from Gayā (Bowker 1997, 154; Chakrabarti 1984, 60).

[687] *Piṇḍadāna* is an offering of a funeral cake to the deceased ancestor as a part of the funeral ceremonies. The food is believed to nourish the deceased person.

[688] Boti is repeating a version of a mystical story of the holy place. According the myth recorded in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Lord Rāma came to Gaya with his wife Sītā to perform funeral rites.

home at least somewhat renewed, either because of personal consolation or the sheer variety. For some, the pilgrimage marked a turning point in their lives.

## 5.4 Meaning of the ritual conduct for the mother herself

As shown throughout this study, religious activities of the women interviewed were principally targeted for the well-being of their children and husband, and mostly confirmed traditional views on the roles of women. However, managing the ritual conduct added to women's self-esteem and autonomy, and gave women confidence that they were doing what a respectable mother should do for her children. In critical situations, religious activities kept women occupied and thus gave them a feeling of control over the circumstances. Women thought that by performing rituals they themselves participated in administering the lives of their children. Furthermore, rituals were, for many of my interviewees, a means to express feelings and concerns that might not have been expressed otherwise. For instance, no woman would admit that she is suffering from infertility, but she might let others know that she was adhering to this and that *brata* in hopes of a child. Their obedient adherence to the ritual conduct brought women respect from the surrounding community. The various observances provided them with ways to show their embeddedness in religious and motherly duties as well as their devotion and dedication towards the deities. The communal aspect of the mothering rituals should not be underestimated either. Many rituals were observed together with other women, all of whom shared the concern for their children.

Many interviewees mentioned that conducting rituals was a custom they had learned from others, but none admitted that they carried out rituals merely for the sake of custom. Some maintained that devotion towards god sprang from the devotee's mind (*mana theke*) and had an effect on the mind as well. True devotion was not a sheer custom or practice, but thought to be rooted in the mind. Janbazar interviewee Babi reflected on the role of the mind as follows:[689]

> I do *pūjās* all the time. Many forget the *pūjās*. But I keep my mind on god all the time. God is with people all the time. I mean, if one's mind is pure, god will stay there.

Babi implies that the devotee communicates with a deity through her mind. It is the devotee's mind that strives for god, and that hosts as well as forgets god. In Babi's view, every person has a mind, and the mind can be influenced by the will and actions; the mind communicates with external influences, such as god. Mind is also understood to be a source of power. Janbazar interviewee Anga recited a song in the Bhojpur dialect, which may be translated as follows:[690]

> Oh mind, if you pray to a stone, even the stone dissolves. First, offer a *pūjā*, it is the gate of the world.

[689] Babi was interviewed in Janbazar on 11 December 2003.

[690] Anga was interviewed in Janbazar on 4 December 2003. The translation was done by my research assistant who transliterated my interviews.

Anga herself interpreted the meaning of the song by saying that "if you offer your prayers sincerely even to a stone, considering it to be god, the hardness of the stone melts". In Anga's view the source of power was a sincere mind, not god alone. With a sincere prayer a devotee could influence god, who then contributed to the good, and helped in overcoming adversities. The sincere mind represented the gift that was given in the hope of rewards.

Several interviewees professed that observing rituals gave them peace of mind (*maner śānti*), or, that by adhering to the rituals they wished to attain peace of mind. According to Babi and Anga, peace of mind was to be experienced by an individual, which was different from communal harmony or unity among people:

> I feel a sense of relief and peace of mind when I perform *pūjās*. (Babi)

> Previously I had a lot of difficulties. But the difficulties have lessened to a great degree after I have started offering *pūjās*. *Pūjā* is a mind reliever. If nothing happened, why would anyone offer their prayers! (Anga)

These statements suggest that performing rituals gave the women psychological support. Both Babi and Anga contended that religious activities, particularly offering *pūjās*, had lessened their mental stress. Most interviewees felt the same, but some felt quite the opposite. For them, ritual conduct did not give peace of mind but caused mental pressure. This was mainly because they could not affort to purchase the items required for the rituals and because they did not know how to carry them out. For most women, however, religious activities gave their everyday lives a sense of meaning. Ritual cycles gave their lives a sens of rhythm: Every morning and every night were welcomed by invoking the deities. The regularity brought a feeling of safety and security. The festive *pūjās* and celebrations that interrupted the everyday routine were usually seen as a welcome change, even if preparing for these *pūjās* required time and effort. Most women, such as Ganti interviewee Rani, felt that religious celebrations brought them joy and leisure: "When we have *pūjā* at our house, we have a lot of fun. We play games and children get balloons."[691]

Religious feasts kept women occupied with cooking, since each *pūjā* had special food preparations which were first offered to the deities, and then enjoyed afterwards. Finishing the ritual fast at the closing of the *pūjā* was a time to eat food that people could not usually afford. The sacrificed animals, fowls, goats, and pigs were prepared and eaten. It was also common for families and neighbourhoods to share and exchange their preparations and the women had a chance to prove their proficiency in cooking. At times, family feasts were a major headache for the hosts, who worried about how they could fill every hungry mouth coming to celebrate with them. In any case, the women's highly active role in organizing all the practical details of the religious festivities was a duty well respected by family members and relatives.

[691] Rani was interviewed in Ganti on 2 February 2004.

Most of the women interviewed spoke with ease about their religious beliefs, gods, and feelings connected to the ritual conduct. For them the relationship between a devotee and deity was personal, such as the relationship of master and servant, or of two friends, or even of lovers. Harijan Basti interviewee Pho explained how she prayed to goddess Mā Dūrgā:[692]

> I tell Mā Durgā: Mā Durgā, you (*tumi*) are of our kind. Mā Durgā, we give you *pūjā*. Please, love us. We want to be similar to you.

When Pho prayed to the goddess she addressed the deity by a Bengali form (*tumi*) used when speaking to someone equal to the speaker. She talked to the goddess as she would address a dear friend or someone whom she profoundly loved and had a special relationship with. Similar affection was expressed by Ganti interviewee Mila, who was fond of worshipping the goddess Lakṣmī:[693]

> My father and mother already made Lakṣmī pūjā in the village and I am doing it at our home. The menfolk are doing it separately at the temple. Every day I give *pūjā* in the morning. Once a year we give *pūjā* through a Brahman, because we love this goddess (*debatā*). I love to give her *pūjās*.

Mila talked about Lakṣmī as if the goddess were a family member that her whole family revered and looked after. Goddess Lakṣmī could be compared to a grandmother or great aunt that Mila had grown to respect and show affection to. She mentioned that menfolk occasionally went to worship Lakṣmī at the temple, but that she did it daily at home. As shown earlier in this study, the religious responsibilities of men and women were often shared in this way. Mila did not complain, but claimed that she loved to give *pūjās* to Lakṣmī. She and other interviewees described their relationship with deities as intimate, affectionate, and personal, which at least partly resulted from their continuous daily devotion and worship.

Most also believed that the god/gods knew them and their concerns personally, and responded to them in a sensible and just way. Questioning the justness of a deity was thought to be inappropriate, even though in difficult times some pondered why they had to face such trials and whether the deities were involved in their vicissitudes. Harijan Basti interviewee Boti's thoughts hovered between trust in god and disbelief, but she would not blame god for the loss of her children:[694]

> Interviewer: Who are the gods that you do *pūjās* for in your house?
>
> Boti: There is Śītalā god (*ṭhākura*). There are Gaṇeśa, Lakṣmī, and Śiva-Pārvatī.
>
> Interviewer: What daily *pūjās* do you give?
>
> Boti: I finished giving. What should I do? There is no one in the house. My husband does not care, he has no faith.

[692] Pho was interviewed in Harijan Basti on 4 March 2004.

[693] Mila was interviewed in Ganti on 28 January 2004.

[694] Boti was interviewed in Harijan Basti on 5 February 2004.

> Interviewer: You have faith?
>
> Boti: See, it is possible that one makes *pūjā* for well-being but nothing good follows. God (*ṭhākura*) never causes suffering (*kaṣṭa*), is it not so? […] I am alive. I am eating, my husband is working. We have money. But my mind goes this way and that way. Why does God (*Bhagavān*) let this happen? He will not do evil, but for me there is no god. What is this difficulty for? But still, I believe in god.

Here Boti discusseed the very questions of existence, and of good and evil. She wondered how it was possible that the god she believed in, who was good and never allowed suffering, had nevertheless let her suffer. She asked what the suffering was for. Boti concluded that even though she believed in god, there was no god for her. This must had been psychologically extremely painful to admit. In the course of her interview she repeatedly said that her situation was driving her to madness. Yet, regardless of her disbelief and misery, Boti was convinced that god knew about her suffering, and that all good things in her life came from god:

> I give *pūjā* at home, but why am I doing it? […]Why are the *pūjās* so meaningful for me? I have had so much difficulty. My in-laws did not give me a paisa and my parents did not give me a paisa. I grew up by invoking god. God did not leave me on the street. I did not have anything. I used to call on god all the time, Śiva god, Pārvatī, I used to appeal to them all the time. With the help of god I got this house. It is our own house. By investing money we got a brick house. My husband was also working hard. He did not want to take money from others. He is that kind of man. I told my husband, see, we have built a house, I want to give a *pūjā*. […] When I bought land we built another house, and then again I gave *pūjā*.

Boti was consoled by the belief that god knew about her suffering. She felt that she was not forced to give *pūjās,* but could voluntarily choose to do so, and found it meaningful for her. Boti explained how she had always relied on appealing to god in difficult times. She recalled the time when she had nothing, but now, with the assistance of god, she had gained wealth.

Boti illustrates the logic of reciprocity and exchange of gifts between the deity and devotee. In the beginning she had nothing. Neither her in-laws nor parents had given her any money or support after her (love) marriage. Under those circumstances she had started calling on god, performing *pūjās* and observing fasts. Boti believed that in exchange for her gifts and efforts she had been given a house, and later on even more wealth. On her part, Boti had continued giving *pūjā* to god.

# PART IV: CONCLUSION

# 6 Conclusions

## 6.1 Studying low caste mothers' rituals: a brief evaluation of the research

The main motive for this study was to listen to and mediate the voices of low caste women and their community as they interpret their religious and ritual universe. This overall aim was cultivated into a proper research assignment: to identify and classify religious rituals and practices of mothering that women adhere to, and to decipher the meanings and motivation underlying their ritual conduct. The definite research questions were formed as: What are the functions and meanings of gift-giving and gift exchange in low caste mothers' rituals? and how do these ritual activities influence the self concept and social status of low caste women? I presented two key arguments: First, I assumed that a gift offered is not a mere gift, but involves a deal, and second, I challenged the idea of low caste women as truly low. In this chapter, the main research results are listed and briefly discussed.

In carrying out the ethnographic fieldwork in three Kolkatan low caste neighbourhoods, I immersed myself in a language, climate, customs, social code, and logic distant to my own. After visiting a number of Kolkata urban project areas of Lutheran World Service India (LWSI), the fieldwork began with the selection of communities suitable for my research interests. I was introduced to the people of the communities by the LWSI personnel and was initially identified as one of them. Gradually I became acquainted with the people in those neighbourhoods, and they accepted my presence and research initiative. By the end of the fieldwork I had spent eight months in three low caste neighbourhoods, observed and participated in countless family and community events and activities, conducted a number of group and individual interviews, recorded various details in the notebooks, and tape recorded interviews with thirty-two women. At this point I can note with appreciation that my informants were remarkably courageous to trust a near stranger with very personal and intimate details of their lives.

Initially, this study was framed as a study on married women's rituals (*strī ācāras*). According to Wadley, L. Gupta, and Fruzzetti, among others, women's rituals are different from institutionalized rituals requiring professional priests. They constitute a separate domain of women, and the focus of the rituals is on those issues and concerns that are crucial particularly for women. As this study advanced, the research topic was defined to concern the ritual conduct and customs related specifically to motherhood and childcare, a subject matter surely at the heart of married women's interests. As a result of the tentative ethnographic analysis, following the inductive approach of the grounded theory, I developed the concept of the mothering ritual, which had earlier been introduced by Hélène Stork. This concept helped me prepare the way for the initial grouping and classification of the research data. The concept of the mothering ritual became a dominant category under which the ritual types were grouped. The mission of the ethnographic recording was then to recognize and categorize types of

mothering rituals, describe the details of their practice, and discover the meanings that women bestowed them with.

The mothering ritual was understood in a broad sense, covering a wide spectrum of religious practices related to motherhood. The main types of mothering rituals comprised the prenatal situation; the rituals performed to improve fertility; the birth and postnatal rites; and the various practices by which women sought protection and cures for their maturing children. A chronological definition, based on the different phases of motherhood, served as a signpost to the analysis and enabled me to include and utilise the greater part of the ethnographic data collected. It is my contention that the concept of the mothering ritual and the way the different categories of mothering rituals were produced in this study could also be used as a broad schema for studying mothering activities and rituals in other cultural contexts. Mothering rituals could be considered as a genre of rituals similar, for instance, to marriage rituals, funeral rites, or initiation rituals.

In this study, rituals were explored from the viewpoint of gift-giving and gift exchange. This was inspired by the gift theory of Mauss and his successors. In contrast to Mauss, the gift exchange was approached as an interaction that occurred particularly between the devotee and deity, and the social function of gift-giving in rituals was mainly left aside. In introducing his theory of the gift Mauss applied it also to the domain of divinities and spirits which were believed to be in relationship with the world of humans. This study contributes to the aspect of Mauss' theory that has been given much less attention than his views of gift exchange as an elementary form of the social organization of (primitive) societies. In examining and analysing the ritual conduct of my informants, it became obvious that for them the gift given to god in the ritual context was motivated and intentional. The gift to god was given in hope of reciprocity, i.e. a return gift, and it involved various material or immaterial aspects, such as sacrificial offerings, promises, or vows given to the deity. It might also be a fast, pilgrimage, or any type of voluntary abstinence or suffering for the deity.[695] The return gift from the deity was believed to be a favour from the god in the form of, for instance, fulfilled wishes, success in life, a male child, merit, peace of mind, and consolation.

The act of gift-giving was most concrete in the *pūjā*, a ritual of homage involving offerings given to a deity. In most rituals that women performed, the act of giving was staged so that the offerings were handed over and displayed at the feet of an effigy, any idol, or picture representing a deity. In temples the gifts were usually given to professional priests, *pāṇḍās, pūjāris,* or *purohitas*, who, as eligible specialists, then conducted a service with the offerings given to the deity on behalf of the devotee. In both cases, directly or indirectly, the devotee conveyed her fidelity and wishes to the deity. In the communities participating in this study people always approached the divinities with material gifts. The act of giving and offering proved to be one of the most fundamental aspects of women's devotion, and expressed an

[695] In Chapter 2 it was suggested that immaterial elements such as sounds (*mantra*), hand signs (*mudrā*), or songs during the rituals can be understood as gifts to a god, since they are generally meant to please, entertain, and influence the deity.

elemental component in their relationship with the divine. The gods were given gifts because they were thought to have power to grant rewards.

## 6.2 Ritual conduct: personally meaningful duty and means to gain influence

Most of the women interviewed turned towards deities with gift offerings at various turns of life and expected the supernatural powers to intervene in their worldly situations to protect them and to provide them with material goods for their everyday subsistence. Women believed that by their rightful conduct of domestic and voluntary rituals they could contribute to the well-being and success of their children and kin. They clearly despised those women who did not have the knowledge or were too lazy or otherwise incapable of performing rituals. "She is of no use to her family, because she is not doing the *pūjās,*" they would say. A decent, caring mother (and wife) was expected to perform this service for her family. Some of the women mentioned that they wanted to follow rituals but because of other responsibilities could not spare the time for ritual conduct, and therefore relied on someone else's, usually the daughter-in-law's, compliance with following the domestic rites.

Figure 22: Men are often having an assistant role in the ritual performance. Women are respected for their devotion and proficiency in ritual conduct.

A woman's proper management of ritual behaviour also won the respect of her husband, in-laws, and paternal family and placed her in high regard. In most households in my fieldwork areas the responsibility of adhering to domestic rituals was almost entirely the women's. The male role was usually to assist women in running the ritual procedure or to purchase supplies required for the performance. Some men chose to leave 'the business' completely in the hands of women, although men were more apt to participate in the conduct of *pūjās* during the main feasts, especially those involving Brahman service.

At the beginning of this study I presented the argument that low caste women are not necessarily truly low. This opinion is supported by Allen's view that in terms of status and autonomy women's position improves the lower one descends in the social hierarchy. Most of the Ganti and Harijan Basti interviewees actively participated in decision making within their families; they worked for wages outside the home – some even maintaining the family; most of them were free to move and socialize with others; some of them had married by choice; and some even gained religious authority within their community. These factors prove that Ganti and Harijan Basti women enjoyed high regard within their own community. In Janbazar the execution of *purdah* resulted in various restrictions on women. Women were cautiously guarded, both physically and socially. It must be noted that such strict control over women's purity and chastity is typically an upper caste feature. In terms of autonomy, Janbazari women's position was obviously lower than the women of the other communities studied – a finding that clearly supports my argument.

One noteworthy finding regarding the logic and motives underlying women's ritual conduct was the freedom of them to decide why they performed a certain rite. The actual procedure of the ritual persisted, but the women – according to their personal preference – could specify their objectives and wishes, which were somehow related to the general purpose of the rite. During important religious feasts in particular, when many women fasted, it was common for them to perform the rites for some specific aim.[696] They followed the established rules of the ritual conduct expected of them, but gave the offerings with certain goals in mind. Since the major *pūjās* were celebrated on auspicious days, when the deities were presumed to be more favourable and amenable than usual, it was also considered an advantageous time to give the deities gifts.

The ritual conduct required much effort, time, and economic resources. Offerings and ritual supplies were expensive for the families – bearing in mind they hardly could earn enough for their immediate subsistence. Investing such great amounts in the ritual management alone testified to the importance of the observance of rituals for families. The men, regardless of their reluctance to engage in ritual conduct, encouraged their spouses and other women to do so. In addition to the daily domestic rituals (*nityakarma*), women were expected to follow weekly, monthly, and annual ritual cycles. On a weekly basis most women observed fasts, or at least gave up eating meat on some weekdays in reverence to the deities. Each weekday was

[696] In similar fashion, people in a Western context could choose to celebrate Christmas not merely as the birthday of Jesus, but also for a safe and painless childbirth, or for the birth of a son.

thought to denote a certain divinity, and devotees of the divinity observed abstinence accordingly. Fasting was also an essential part of the various *bratas,* vows that women voluntarily – or as ordered by the family – conducted.

For a more profound understanding of women's logic concerning ritual manners it was useful to evaluate the aspects of duty and freedom of choice underlying their ritual behaviour. Women often argued that they had engaged in observing a rite out of their personal choice and preference. However, in most cases the foremost motivation to follow voluntary rituals was a woman's duty towards her family. Freedom of choice was exercised in a certain frame of reference, that is, as far as it contributed to the well-being of (male) children, husband, and the rest of the family. None of the women interviewed admitted that they had observed a fast or any votive rite for the sake of themselves alone. Such a suggestion was usually welcomed with laughs. The absence of genuine freedom of choice is one of the essential arguments used in asserting that women's ritual actions confirm male supremacy. Although the women interviewed lacked true freedom of choice and were ordered to conduct rituals for the well-being of others, they mainly did it willingly, out of their personal choice.

Most interviewees contended that performing rituals was personally meaningful for them. Women, of their own accord, sought assistance and a chance for a supernatural encounter in diverse circumstances in which they faced emotional pressure and insecurity. Ritual action was a sort of language, a commonly accepted way of expressing feelings and concerns that otherwise they would keep to themselves. For example, the pressure on a young wife to produce an offspring for the family was not a subject matter to be discussed with in-laws, but she could turn to a deity, give the deity offerings and vows, and in this manner communicate her concern. Similarly, the whole prenatal period, the delivery of the child, and the responsibility of nurturing the child were all times fraught with anxiety and insecurity. In these situations women, in a way, used the rituals to lighten the burden of their personal load.

According to the interviewees, the essential rewards and return gifts of the ritual practice and devotion were the feeling of confidence that they themselves could influence the course of events instead of idling away the time and waiting to see what would happen. Women described the ritual conduct as demanding and time-consuming, but also mind-relieving, and gave them strength, joy, and peace of mind. A few women said that they did not experience any benefits from performing rituals, but they continued because it was a custom, and because of the expectations of their family members.

### 6.3 Making business: promises in exchange for having wishes granted

In the course of this study it became evident that at the very centre of the women's religious piety was the custom of giving promises and vows (*mānasika*) to the deities. When asked to explain what a devotee ought to do in order to assure results from her dedication, most women mentioned promises or vows. Promises were usually given alongside material offerings as

part of the *pūjā*. The reasoning behind the activity is as follows: A devotee with a fervent desire ought to go to a deity and agree on a price for having her desire fulfilled. While waiting for the deity to act in her favour, she ought to maintain her loyalty to the deity in the form of material and immaterial gifts. After the deity has granted the devotee her wish, she should go back to the deity and fulfil her promise. Many of the women interviewed believed that they had drawn results and achieved their goals in this way. If the wish was not granted even after generous promises, it was common to turn to another deity instead, and to try again. If the wish was not granted even then, women tended to think that there was either some mistake in conducting the rites, or that the wish could not be granted because of one's past deeds.

Most women mentioned that they had given promises to deities or that they were keeping one at the moment. Some complained that it was difficult to keep all the promises they had made. Some admitted that they were frustrated and had given up the practice because their loyalty towards the deity had not brought them a desired end. Most women spoke openly about the promises that they had given. An ordinary promise involved loyalty towards the deity, accompanied by material gifts. In fulfilling their promises the women had, for example, given goats to be sacrificed, carried out pilgrimages, given golden and silver items to the deities, and bathed in sacred waters. It was commonly thought that the more fervent the desire the greater the promise. Women had, among many other things, given promises in return for the birth of a son, protection from evil, cure for the illness of a family member, and for success in marriage negotiations. Failure and negligence in fulfilling the promise were understood as a grave threat for the family. Most believed that deities should not be fooled with false promises and that the anger of the deities brought misfortune for the family.

Giving promises, similarly to fasting, was believed to be a tool for individuals and families to contribute to the state of affairs. It was commonly acknowledged that fulfilling promises required some type of suffering. It had an effect on the economy of the family, or, at the very least, caused inconvenience. Yet, it was a price people thought was worth paying in order to gain something more precious in return. Promise-making and the accompanying logic displayed the idea of reciprocity in clear terms. The gift of the devotee was conditional and promised only in exchange for a reward. The deity was treated as a rational being that was expected to be interested in such negotiations. The practice can well be termed 'business-making', in which investments were made only in order to get rewards, and in which the business partners, in one sense or another, negotiated and agreed on contracts and prices to gain mutual satisfaction.

## 6.4 Doing fieldwork in an urban environment

In doing fieldwork in the three urban neighbourhoods of Janbazar, Harijan Basti, and Ganti, it was necessary to take into account the outside influences, changes, and transition under which the individuals, families, and communities constantly lived. The aspect of the past was most intensely present in Janbazar where many of my interviewees had moved fairly recently. Most

Janbazari interviewees continued to compare life in their native village with life in the Kolkata city. In Ganti many women also recounted the ritual practices they engaged in in their villages before moving to Kolkata. The aspect of the future, that is, how life would be for the children, was also discussed. Most believed that their children would have better opportunities and encouraged their (male) children to study.

The city environment and the physical proximity of people from various backgrounds had an obvious impact on the lives of residents of the three neighbourhoods included in this study. Each community was at a different stage of acclimatization to the new urban surroundings. The duration of their stay in Kolkata had an influence on their religious ideas and ritual conduct. Those born in Kolkata and those having stayed there a long time had adopted more foreign religious ideas and ritual practices than those who had recently arrived.

Being illiterate, most of my interviewees relied totally on the oral tradition, stories, and rumours people narrated to them. In a new environment they were hit by the influx of new ideas not only by their neighbours but through audio-visual media such as posters, advertisements, radio, TV, and movies. Several women in each three communities reported that they had added new deities to their family pantheon and started abiding by religious practices and *pūjās* which were unknown to them before coming to Kolkata. The adoption of the worship of goddesses Mā Kālī and Santoṣī Mā are just few examples of this. Many had also been informed about and begun visiting the local pilgrimage sites, temples, and healers. It was obvious that most women took an active role in selecting those religious ideas and practices that corresponded to their interests and preferences.

The new city environment had an impact on mothering activities and rituals as well. Staging all the birth rites, for example, as they were run in the village of the origin, had become impossible in the new environment. The old customs had to be adjusted to the new surroundings. While some families returned to their home villages to celebrate rituals and *pūjās* in the old way, most women maintained that they still followed some religious traditions of their community but adjusted those to their present situation. Since the older interviewees recollected birth practices of the past, and younger informants explained current practices, it was possible to assemble a spectrum of mothering and birth customs of both past and present, and to assess how the old customs have been remoulded and adjusted to the modern situation.

The main results and conclusions of this study are the following:

- The concept of the mothering ritual developed here may be used as a broad schema for studying mothering activities and rituals in other cultural contexts as well.
- The idea of reciprocity and gift exchange – especially giving promises and vows in exchange for rewards – appeared as the very essence women's ritual behaviour to the extent that their ritual conduct can be conceptualized in terms of business making.
- The women interviewed believed that by proper management of ritual conduct they contributed to the well-being of their children (and families), and consequently won the respect of their families and community.
- By performing rituals women articulated their unspoken feelings and experiences and gained confidence in themselves.
- Under the influences of the urban environment women were modifying their ritual behavior and taking an active role in adopting new customs and deities according to their personal preference.

## 6.5 Reliability of the research and position of the researcher

As is commonly agreed, in an ethnographic study, the role and character of the researcher, the way she chooses to enter and operate in the field, and the kind of contacts she is able to develop, all have a major impact on the research. Studying traditions and cultures very different and distant from a researcher's own has both advantages and inconveniences. Since I had only a basic knowledge of the language and the implications of the various cultural symbols, my informants had to explain each detail. This, in fact, was a fruitful way to work, since while explicating the particulars, the women revealed much of what constitutes their world view: premises, positions, and beliefs. Even so, there is no denying that the vast divergence between the personal histories of the researcher and the women studied must influence the interpretation of the research data.

The qualities of the researcher that most essentially influenced the ethnographic work were that I am a fair-skinned woman, married, and introduced to the neighbourhoods by the NGO. Fair skin indicated that I was from a western country inhabited by wealthy Christians. I was an outsider, and I did not represent any group of the Indian caste society, a fact which allowed us to communicate more freely. Since the topic of this study belonged so explicitly to the domain of women, my gender was an advantage. Intimate themes, such as childbearing and infertility treatments, were not a subject matter to be discussed with males. We also shared the status of being married women and of being mothers, which gave us a common ground for dealing with private issues more confidently. As many women wanted to ask me questions,

and were interested to hear about corresponding situations in my native country, the learning experience was mutual.

In my estimation, my entry into the field as a representative of an NGO had the most far-reaching influence on the research data. At the initial state of the field study I moved around with the NGO staff, and whether or not I wanted it, I was identified with the staff and their ideology. It took quite a while before the members of the research communities felt confident enough to openly discuss the customs and beliefs they assumed I considered superstitious and strange. At first, women wanted to appear more modern than they actually were. Little by little the true faces behind the masks were revealed, and I could capture them as they were, in the midst of approaching new ideas, yet holding on to their old traditions. However, it must be admitted that I could not fully do away with the influence of my role as a foreign representative of an NGO. The topic is discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

As already mentioned, I applied the method of asking the same questions again and again, and encouraging the women to explain the meanings of the terms they used. For example, it occurred to me that in casual talk essential terms such as *pūjā*, *brata,* and *mānasika* were used quite freely and interchangeably. These variations and the vague usage of the terms turned out to be important conclusions of this research. In the minds of the women, these terms and the practices related to them were so interconnected that one usually involved the other two.

With respect to the data received from the interviews, I have no reason to doubt the sincerity of the interviewees. Confusion and inadequate understanding were certainly involved in the interviews. Because of the insufficient language skills I was not able to respond and to ask focused questions as quickly as I had wanted to. I understood many details only after repeatedly listening to the recorded tapes. I was fortunate, however, to return to the field sites in 2008 while writing the analysis, and could fill in some gaps of missing information by asking the questions once more. But even then, every detail could not be clarified. The basic principle in utilizing the research data was that if I had any reason to suspect misreading of some point, such material was left outside this study.

## 6.6 Were the voices heard?

From a western context, whenever the women of the lowest strata of Indian society are on view – whether it be in a documentary film, an article in a magazine, or any statistical report on their position – they are usually presented as unfortunate, oppressed objects of pity. The same is true of academic studies. There is no denying the importance of investigating and reporting on the living conditions and social status of these people and criticizing the public sentiment of the caste society, but I am troubled by the silence of the low caste women themselves. The intention of this study, well acknowledging the limitations of it, was to throw light on the self-expression of low caste women and to discuss how they themselves determine their position.

The main contribution of this study is its presentation of the true voices of women in three low caste neighbourhoods of Kolkata as they described their experiences and customs concerning motherhood. There are a great number of interviewees' direct quotes – translated but not revised to any great extent. This study reveals the abundance of mothering customs and the devotion of most mothers in rearing their children. This unwritten cultural knowledge could be utilized by both local and government officials and NGOs that work for family planning and community development schemes. Knowing the mothering customs would likely endow officials with a more sensitive approach to introducing their ideals and practices. At best, the members of the communities could keep the traditions and practices that constitute their identity, yet benefit from new tools and advice such as prenatal instruction.

No extensive study has been done on either mothering or birth rituals in India. Mothering customs have not been approached as an individual genre of rituals. This study therefore encourages further study on the topic and provides a tool to develop and categorize the varied mothering rituals. In an Indian context it would be relevant and enlightening to compare the customs of women from different classes of the caste society, and inquire how they possibly indicate the social status of the community. It would be, for example, worthwhile to investigate the role that mothering customs play among middle and upper class families with a higher education and better access to modern medicine. An interreligious approach would also give valuable insight.

One standpoint could be to look at the modification and development of the birth rites recorded in old or modern ritual manuals. In terms of the oral tradition, it would be worth the effort to analyse the impact of Bengali folklore on modern mothering rituals. One fascinating starting point would be to compare the birth and mothering customs of traditions distant to each other. As this study was more horizontal than vertical, one way to continue would be to delve more deeply into one of the many rituals, deities and subjects brought up; these include the cult of Mā Ṣaṣṭhī, the birth rite of Mukhebhāt, the motives of Tarakeswar pilgrims, and the Muslim healers of devoted Hindus.

# Appendices

## Appendix I: Lists of questions

### General questions

1 Background
- Place, identity and culture of origin of the community?
- Present place, identity and culture of the community?
- What are the changes that have taken place?
- What are the influences that have effected the change?

2 Women's sphere
- Where do the women of this community move?
- What type of social networks are they involved in?
- What is the hierarchy of women within the family/community?

3 Religious sphere
- How is religious authority shared within the family/community?
- What are the daily religious activities of a family/community?
- What religious activities are compulsory/voluntary?
- What religious activities are seasonal/occasional?
- How are women involved in religious activities of the family/community?
- In which activities are women active participants/ritual performers/passive observers?

4 Mothering rituals
- What are the rituals/ritual activities related to fertility, pregnancy, childbirth, infant care?
- Why do women perform them?

5 Ritual process

5.1 Participants
- Who participate in the ritual performance?
- How are the participants related?
- How is divine participation understood?

5.2 Preparation

- What preparations are done for the ritual?
- Space and time?
- Concerns about purity of performance?
- Observations of a fast/vow?

5.3 Process

- What is done during the ritual process?
- Offering, purification, sacrifice, singing, chanting, acting, prayer, meditation, *mudras,* possession?

5.4 Promise

- Why is the ritual performed?
- What kind of exchange of gifts is taking place: What is given and what is hoped/expected in return? Material/immaterial gifts?

Detailed list of questions

I Intro

1. Name?
2. Age?
3. Husband/children?
4. Livelihood, source of income of the family?
5. Literate?

II Background

6. Who lives in your house?
7. Who are the other close relatives that live in the same community?
8. Are there relatives/other people who visit your house regularly?
9. How long have you lived in this house/community?
10. Where did you/your ancestors come from?
11. Please describe the location and life at your place of origin?
12. What occupation did your family practise?
13. Describe your relationship with your mother and father?
14. Why did you/your ancestors move to Kolkata?
15. How is your present life – food, family ties, traditions, habits – different from life in your place of origin?
16. What do you want to teach your children about your family traditions?
17. Do you think that your children accept what you are teaching them or are they absorbing new customs?
18. How do you think your children's lives will differ from yours?
19. What do you think about the environment of your community? Does it give good opportunities for you and your children, or does it have a bad influence?

III Women's sphere

20. During a usual day, where do you go? Bazaar/work place/school/neighbours/friends/temple?
21. Can you move around freely within your neighbourhood? Do you need to ask permission to go out?
22. Do you usually move around alone or with other women/with children/you're your husband?
23. How often do you go to places further away such as your mother's or a relative's house, temple/pilgrimage place?
24. Would you like to be able to move around more?
25. How many women live in your house?

26. How is the housework shared in your family? What do you/your mother-in-law/other women do?
27. Does your husband participate in housework?
28. Who makes decisions in your house about children's issues/shopping/where to spend money, etc.?
29. Who are the men/women in your community you respect the most?
30. Are you afraid of some people?

IV Religious sphere

31. Who are the gods/goddesses present at your home altar?
32. Who are the deities you think of/pray to daily/weekly?
33. Is there one or a few deities that you are closest to? Which ones?
34. What do you do to please that deity?
35. Who is responsible for performing daily rites/*pūjās* at your home?
36. What activities does that rite/*pūjā* include? When is it performed?
37. Who in your house is most concerned/interested in performing rites or religious duties? Who is the least interested?
38. Do you perform similar rites/*pūjās* as your mother did?
39. What type of rites does your mother–in-law/daughter perform?
40. Which rites/*pūjās* do you perform alone/with other women/with the family/with the community?
41. Which rites/*pūjās* are the most important for you and bring you the most benefit?
42. Have you recently started performing rites that you earlier did not perform?
43. Does your husband encourage you to perform rites?
44. Are there any women's rites/*pūjās* that men do not participate in/are not allowed to participate in?
45. Do you take any spiritual/religious advice from anyone? From whom? Guru, saint, astrologist, healer?
46. Do you sometimes observe a fast or take a vow to obtain something? For what purpose do you fast?
47. Does anyone in your family go on a pilgrimage or to sacred places at times? For what purpose do they go?
48. Do you keep any symbols (ornaments, amulets, etc.) that protect you or bring you good fortune?

V Mothering rituals: rituals related to fertility, pregnancy, childbirth, infant care

49. When you and your husband were planning to have a baby, was there any rite or course of action you decided to observe? *Brata*/vow/visit to a temple/prayer, etc.?
50. If it is difficult for a couple to have a baby, what should they do?
51. What can a woman/couple do to increase/maintain their fertility?

52. If a woman/couple wishes especially for a son, what can she/they do?
53. When you became pregnant, were there any celebrations or rites that you/your family/in-laws performed?
54. How did you announce the news?
55. Who took care of you when you were pregnant?
56. Did your mother's/in-laws' family give any special treatment/*pūjās*?
57. Did you wish to get a son or daughter?
58. Where did you give birth to your babies?
59. Who were present when you were in labour?
60. Could you please describe that moment; what happened?
61. When the baby was born, what happened? What did you do with the baby? What did others do?
62. What did you do for yourself? What did others do for you?
63. When did your husband see the baby? What did he say?
64. What happened the following week?
65. Who decided on the name for the baby and how was it given?
66. When did you give the baby solid food for the first time?
67. Were you afraid of losing your baby? What did you do then?

Appendix II: Natal *saṃskāras* and *saṃskāras* of childhood

There are altogether nine rites of passage, which comprise the natal *saṃskāras* and the *saṃskāras* of childhood. Seven of them belong to the group of sixteen main *saṃskāras.* The following short introduction is based on four sources: *Saṃskāra* by McGee, *Hindu Samskaras: Socio-Religious Study of the Hindu Sacraments* by Pandey, *The Rites of the Twice-Born* by Stevenson, and *Pūjā and Samskara* by Tachikawa et al. In contemporary practice, each ritual involves great variation concerning timing, procedure and significance, depending on the tradition the actors follow.

*Conception or insemination (Garbhādhāna)*
Garbhādhāna is the rite of the sanctification of the womb and seed. The ritual presupposes an idea that beneficent gods help people in begetting children. The conception rite is to be performed immediately after the wedding. Most texts advise that it should be conducted at the end of the three days of the first menstruation after marriage. On the fourth day and onwards, the period of woman's impurity is over, and she is physically prepared to conceive. Some perform the rite only once, others more often. The sex of the would-be child is believed to be determined by the number of nights on which the conception takes place. The procedure of the ceremony of the rite is simple, and includes sacred verses (*mantras*), vows or sacrifice depending on the tradition.[697]

*Quickening a male child (Puṁsavāna)*
After the conception is confirmed, the child in the womb is consecrated by Puṁsavāna saṃskāra*,* the rite through which people believe the male child is produced. The proper time for the performance ranges from the second to the eight month of pregnancy, by most traditions in the third or fourth month. The *saṃskāra* should be performed when the moon is in a male constellation, a favourable time for producing a male issue. According to the dominant tradition, the procedure of a rite includes the pounding of sprouts of a banyan tree and inserting drops of the spilled juice into the right nostril of the woman, a device meant for preventing miscarriage and removing any complication during pregnancy.[698]

*Hair-parting (Sīmantonnayana)*
As the pregnancy advances, the family's concern for the survival of the mother and foetus increases. Many people believe that a pregnant woman is subject to attacks of evil spirits, and the hair-parting *saṃskāra* is performed in order to ward them off. The rite is also based on knowledge of physiology, according to which the formation of the mind of the would-be child is thought to begin in the fifth month of pregnancy. *Smṛti*-authors underline that every move of an expectant mother influences the unborn child, so the pregnant woman is required to take utmost care to facilitate the process, avoiding any physical shock to the foetus. This fact is-

[697] McGee 2004, 339–340; Pandey 1994, 48–59; Tachikawa & al. 2001, 101.

[698] McGee 2004, 340; Pandey 1994, 60–63; Tachikawa & al. 2001, 101–103.

symbolically emphasized by her husband parting her hair, a rite which according to the dominant tradition, is performed in the fourth or fifth month, or up to the eighth month of pregnancy. The general purpose of the rite is to bring prosperity to the mother and a long life to the unborn child. The pregnancy entails some duties for both wife and husband. The wife's duties consist of a number of restrictions which are to be followed, whereas the husband's duty is to fulfil the wishes of the pregnant wife. If the wishes of a pregnant woman are not met, it is feared that the foetus will be unhealthy or deformed, or that the woman will miscarry.[699]

*Birth ceremonies (Jātakarma)*

Jātakarma is the first *saṃskāra* to be performed after the birth. The rite used to be performed before the severing of the navel cord or immediately after the birth of a child, but according to later traditions, also at the end of the ceremonial impurity of ten days. Jātakarma includes several minor rites. The first ceremony is a rite for the production of intelligence, the second for ensuring a long life for the child. The father of the child performs the third rite for a hardy and pure life of the child. All the ceremonies are accompanied by sacred verses and prayers. At the closing of the rite the baby is washed and placed on the lap the mother for breast-feeding.[700]

*Name-giving (Nāmakaraṇa)*

After the birth, a child is given a name following certain principles. Most Hindus adhere to the rule of the Gṛhyasūtras and perform the name-giving rite on the tenth or twelfth day after the birth of a child. The timing, however, depends on how long people think natal impurity lasts. Before the naming ceremony, mother and child take a bath, and offerings and oblations are given to propitiate various deities. The actual naming, as recorded in Paddhatis, is done by the father, who by leaning towards the right ear of the child, addresses the child by name. Traditionally a child is given four names: 1) a name derived from the constellation under which the child is born, or from its presiding deity, 2) a name given according to the deity of the month in which the child is born, 3) a name according to a family deity, and 4) a popular name, meant for general use in society.[701]

*First outing (Niṣkramaṇa)*

The rite of the first outing derives from the realization that life outside the house is not free from natural and supernatural dangers, and a newborn is subjected to them. The child needs the protection of the gods, whom are worshipped at the rite of the first outing. On the other hand, the rite celebrates the sublime grandeur of the universe, which is introduced to the child for the first time. The main procedure of the rite is very simple: it consists the father taking the child out and making the child look at the sun while reciting the Vedic verse "That eye", a rhyme widely used when one is to look at the sun. The tradition-specific variations are obviously abundant. The time of performing the *saṃskāra* varies from the twelfth day after the

[699] McGee 2004, 341; Pandey 1994, 64–69; Stevenson 1920, 116–122; Tachikawa & al. 2001, 103.

[700] McGee 2004, 341–342; Pandey 1994, 70–77; Stevenson 1920, 6–7; Tachikawa & al. 2001, 104.

[701] McGee 2004, 342; Pandey 1994, 78–85; Stevenson 1920, 13–14; Tachikawa & al. 2001, 105–106.

birth to the fourth month. Some families use this opportunity to take the child to the temple for the first time. The rite is not considered as one of the main sixteen *saṃskāras*.[702]

*First feeding ([G]annaprāśana)*

As the baby grows, she or he is introduced to solid food. The rite of first feeding marks the moment the child is given cooked or rather solid food for the first time. According to the Gṛhyasūtras, the ceremony is performed in the sixth month after the birth of the child, or at the latest when the child is one year old. Teething is also seen as a sign that the child is able to take solid food. The significance of the rite of first feeding is that children are weaned away from their mothers at the proper time. What the child is fed and by whom varies a great deal depending on the customs of a family and region. According to the prevailing tradition, the maternal uncle feeds the child with a mixture of milk, rice, clarified butter and honey.[703]

*Tonsure (Chūṭkaraṇa or Mundan or Caula)*

The safety of the child is a concern for the parents. By performing the *saṃskāra* of tonsure, parents wish to secure a long life for the child. Shaving and cutting the hair and nails is believed to remove impurities and assure prosperity, courage and happiness. In some traditions, the ceremony is thought to have a dedicative purpose, that is, the hair is cut off and offered as a gift to a deity, in the hope of the blessing and protection of the deity. According to another tradition, hair as impure bodily waste is thrown away or hidden in cow-dung. The tonsure ceremony, according to the Gṛhyasūtras, should take place at the end of the first year or before the end of the third year, at the latest before the ceremony of the initiation (Upanaỳana). The rite is nowadays often performed as part of the other natal *saṃskāras*. During the ceremony the child's hair is cut with a razor, an act accompanied by prayers and verses. It is customary to leave a small tuft (*chūṭ*) of hair on top of the head.[704]

*Piercing the ears (Karṇabēdha)*

The original purpose of piercing the ears was decorative and there were no beliefs associated with it, but later the act was given a religious colouring as well, according to which the ears of child should be pierced for the protection from diseases and evil. The rite is also considered necessary for a person to preserve status. The piercing is thought to symbolize attentivess, the importance of hearing and speech, and opening the mind and ears to the wisdom of the Vedas. There is no agreement about the timing of the ceremony and it varies from the tenth day after the birth up to the day of Upanaỳana. The rite of piercing the ears is not included in the sixteen main *saṃskāras*.[705]

[702] McGee 2004, 343: Pandey 1994, 86–89; Stevenson 1920, 18.

[703] McGee 2004, 343; Pandey 1994, 90–93; Stevenson 1920, 19–20; Tachikawa & al. 2001, 108–109.

[704] McGee 2004, 343; Pandey 1994, 94–101; Stevenson 1920, 20–23; Tachikawa & al. 2001, 110–111.

[705] McGee 2004, 343–344; Pandey 1994, 102–105; Stevenson 1920, 23–24.

## Vocabulary

| | |
|---|---|
| *ācāra* | rites; religious (or scriptural) rules and prescriptions; observance of these rules and prescriptions; conduct, behaviour, custom, practice |
| *acchuta* | untouchable, unclean |
| *ālpanā* | designs of Bengali folk art drawn on horizontal surface, used often in ritual context (the same way as *yantra*) |
| *āltā* | red colour dye women use for decorating their feet |
| *amābasyā* | the day of new moon |
| Annaprāśana | ritual (*saṃskāra*) of the first feeding of child with solid food |
| *antara* | distance, intervening space; term used of the period of impurity after childbirth |
| *antyaja* | lowborn person; low caste; depressed class; one of the Śūdra or Caṇḍāla community |
| *ārtī* | offering of light (usually at the closing of *pūjā*) |
| *āśīrbāda* | blessing; offering of blessing from the divine to the human |
| *ātura* | sick, afflicted; term used of the time after childbirth |
| *āturghara* | delivery chamber where mother and newborn stay until they finish the period of impurity |
| Bābā Tāraknāth | an epithet of Śiva worshipped in the pilgrimage site of Tarakeswar |
| *bali* | offering, sacrifice; term often used when referring to blood sacrifice offered to carnivorous deities. The blood sacrifice is sometimes substituted by pumpkin (*kumra bali*) |
| *baṃśa* | race, family, lineage, pedigree, posterity, offspring |
| *bāñjā, bāñjhā* | barren, sterile, infertile; unproductive woman |

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| *basti* | slum; quarters of the poor people |
| *Bhagavān* | God, Lord; revered person; term for addressing God, saint, sage |
| *bhakta* | devotee, votary |
| *bhakti* | devotion, homage, veneration |
| *bhara* | weight, pressure, domination, possession; term used as a synonym for the spirit of deity |
| *bhara hoyā* | to be possessed |
| *bhoga* | object of enjoyment; article of food; food-offering made to a deity |
| *brata* | vow; voluntary (religious or secular) observance that usually includes fasting; practice of ascetic austerities in order to attain a goal |
| *brataphala* | fruit that follows from the observance of *brata* |
| Cāmāra | shoemaker, tanner; currier by caste or trade; Chamar caste |
| Caṇḍāla | those lowest castes that professionally burn dead bodies |
| *chhaṭh* | Hindi word; the sixth day of lunar fortnight |
| Chhaṭha pūjā | sun goddess festival |
| Chhaṭhi pūjā | birth ritual performed on the sixth day after childbirth |
| Chūṭkaraṇa or Mundana | ritual (*saṃskāra*) of tonsure; shaving of the head of a child |
| *dāi/dhāi/dhāi-mā* | self-learned midwife |
| *dakṣiṇā* | fee or gift given to Brahman |
| *dāna* | giving, presentation, donation, present, gift; term often used of the gifts offered to deities |

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| *darśana* | viewing with respect; religious practice of viewing the manifest form of holy image. Devotee is believed to receive merit and blessing in return of the viewing |
| *desācāras* | ritual customs prevalent in particular region |
| Dharmaśāstras | class of Sanskrit texts concerned with the rules of conduct and law. Of the more than 2000 surviving Dharmaśāstras the most influential is *Manusmṛti*, the Laws of Manu. The Dharmaśāstra tradition emphasizes Brahman and high caste interests |
| *dharnā/dharanā* | ritual procedure usually performed at the door of offender as a means of obtaining justice. In general, it refers to whole-hearted pledging towards a certain goal. The ritual is also performed when hoping for a child |
| *dīkṣā* | initiation; admission to a religious practice or order; employment in the service of a sacred cause |
| Durgāpūjā | major religious feast of Śākta Hindus; ten day autumn festival which celebrates the victory of goddess Durgā over buffalo demon Mahiṣāsur |
| *ekādaśī* | the eleventh day of lunar fortnight; fast observed on the eleventh day of lunar fortnight |
| Garbhādhāna | ritual (*saṃskāra*) of securing the conception |
| Gaunā | celebration of the bride coming to the bridegroom's house; second visit of the bride in the bridegroom's house |
| *ghāṭa* | landing stage on the bank of river or pond |
| *gotra* | family, line; classification of the family in accordance with the name of the family saint |
| Gṛhyasūtras | manuals of governing domestic rituals and *saṃskāras*, composed approximately 500 BCE |
| *gunina* | man with occult powers; exorciser, sorcerer |
| *jajmani* | system of services which refers to the socio-economic institution of the pre-industrial self-subsistent village economy in India |

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| Jātakarma | ritual (*saṃskāra*) of securing safe delivery |
| *jāti* | birth, origin, class, race, tribe, community, lineage; term used in India across religions to denote a community, sub-community, clan, or tribe, which typically has a common traditional job function |
| *jatyācāras* | ritual customs of a *jāti* |
| *jhāṛa-phuṅka* | charms, incantations; exorcising of evil spirits practiced mainly in the mosques |
| Jiutiyā pūjā/brata | 'a vow of the living son'; ritual performed for the well-being of children. The feast is also commonly called Jīvitputrika |
| *juṭā* | tasted, partly eaten. In the ritual context the term refers to the left-overs of the food offered first to deity |
| *kabirāja* | physician who follows the Ayurvedic system of treatment |
| *kāmya karma* | rituals done for the fulfilment of one's desire; that which should be performed for the realization of one's desire |
| *kanthā* | quilt made of piecemeal cloth |
| Karṇabēdha | ritual (*saṃskāra*) of piercing the ear or nose of a child |
| *kulācāras* | ritual customs of a family |
| Liṅga (Śivaliṅga) | penis; the phallus of Lord Śiva |
| *mā* | mother |
| Mā Manasā | snake goddess |
| Mā Ṣaṣṭhī | goddess of children and fertility |
| *māduli* | amulet |
| *mānata* | vow; voluntary promise to offer a sacrifice to a deity against the fulfilment of one's request |

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| *mandira* | temple, shrine, house of worship |
| Maṅgala-Kābya | literally 'Poems of Benediction'; Bengali epic poems of the popular deities, composed between the 13th and 18th century |
| *maṅgalkāmanā* | wishes; giving blessings (for a marrying couple, for example) |
| *mānasika* | vow; conditional promise; promise of sacrifice or offering made to deity on condition that one's wish is granted |
| *mānasika deoyā* | to offer to a deity what has been promised; to make a votive offering |
| *mānasika karā* | to promise a sacrifice or offering to a deity; to take a vow on condition that one's wish is granted |
| *Meyedera Bratakathā* | *Stories of Women's Rituals* (name of booklets with women's ritual stories) |
| *Meyedera Bratapārban* | *Ritual Conduct of Women* (name of booklets with women's ritual practices) |
| Muci | worker in animal skin; shoe maker, cobbler, cordwainer, tanner |
| *mudrā* | seal, sign; sign of power through hands (or body in general). In Hindu ritual certain gestures and positions of fingers (*mudrās*) shown by devotee is believed to bring into being the divine spiritual reality |
| Mukhebhāta | feast during which the child is fed rice for the first time |
| *mūrti* | incarnation, embodiment, image, form, shape, figure |
| *mūrti pūjā* | idolatry; image worship |
| *nāimittika karma* | occasional, periodical rite or ceremony |
| *najara* | sight, vision, view, look, glance; also malicious or evil look; evil eye; greedy eye |
| *najara deoyā* | to cast evil eye upon |
| Nāmakaraṇa | ritual (*saṃskāra*) of giving name to a child |

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| Nīl Ṣaṣṭhī | ritual for the well-being and safety of children |
| *nirāmiṣa* | food or diet excluding meat, fish and eggs; vegetarian |
| Niṣkramaṇa | ritual (*saṃskāra*) of the first outing of a child |
| *nitya* | eternal, permanent, enduring; rituals performed regularly for the sake of duty |
| *nitya karma* | daily religious duties and practices |
| *niyama* | prescription, direction, law, rule, system, method, custom, routine duty, practice; rules of ritual conduct |
| *ojhā* | quack professing to have supernatural powers of curing snakebites and other morbidities; exorcist |
| *pāṛā* | defined neighbourhood; locality; quarter consisting of group of people (often sharing occupational and/or caste identity) |
| *pāṇḍā* | Brahman priest acting as a guide to pilgrims at holy places |
| *pañji(kā)* | astrological Hindu almanac that follows the positions of moon |
| *pañcagabya* | five articles deriving from cow, used as food offering in Hindu ritual |
| *pañcamṛta* | five nectars consisting of milk, sugar, honey, yoghurt and ghee, mixed and used as food offering in Hindu ritual |
| *pāonā* | claim; acquisition of gifts; that which ought to be paid for one |
| *pāpa* | sin |
| *pativratã* (in Sanskrit) | *pātibratya* (in Bengali); ideal Hindu woman introduced in the Law book of *Manusmṛti* |
| *paṇa* | promise, price, dowry |
| *pāyasa* | sweet dish prepared by boiling rice in milk with sugar, raisins, nuts and cardamom; sweet rice-porridge |

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| *phakira* | Muslim mendicant, ascetic |
| *pira* | muslim saint |
| *pranāma* | bow, prostration, salutation, obeisance; to bend one's head to as a token of respect |
| *prasāda* | (food) offerings shared among the worshippers as the God's gift and blessing |
| *pūjā* | respect, homage, worship (of image) by offering fruit, cooked food, water, incense, flowers, etc. As an act of devotion, *pūjā* is both a service to a deity and a means to win deity's favour |
| *pūjāri* | professional priest |
| *pukur* | pond, tank |
| Puṁsavāna | ritual (*saṃskāra*) of securing the birth of a male child |
| *puṇya* | merit |
| *puraścaraṇa* | worship of deity with a view of attaining a reward |
| *puraskāra* | reward, prize, remuneration |
| *purdah* | (*paradāprathā* in Bengali) physical segregation of sexes; requirement for women to cover their bodies and conceal their form. Practiced mainly by Muslim communities, but executed also by some Hindu communities |
| Puri | coastal city in the state of Orissa hosting a famous Jagannath temple which is an important pilgrimage destination for especially worshippers of Kṛṣṇa and Viṣṇu |
| *purohita* | priest |
| *pūrṇimā* | the day of full moon |
| *rajoguṇa* | royal quality of human nature marked by passion and spiritedness |
| *sādha* | desire, longing, fancy, choice; feast during which pregnant woman is gifted with what she wishes |

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| Śākta | devoted to or worshipping female principles of creation |
| *śākta pīṭha* | collection of Hindu sacred places scattered throughout the subcontinent. The word *pīṭha* means altar, seat or sacred spot where the body parts of the goddess Satī fell to earth after she had been cut to pieces by the discus of Viṣṇu. Tradition has it that there are fifty-one *śākta pīṭhas* |
| *śakti* | energy, power; female energy; female consort of a deity |
| *śaktism* | Hindu tradition or current of Hindu thought with *śakti*, divine feminine power, as the focus of its devotion. The divinity is either the supreme being conceived as female or a consort of one of the Hindu gods |
| *saṃskāra* | life cycle rituals; rites of passage marking transitions of Hindus through life and death |
| *sannyāsī*, *sannyāsinī* (f.) | ascetic; ascetic mendicant; renouncer |
| *saṅkrānti* | the last day of a month |
| Santoṣī Mā | goddess who emerged when the Indian film industry launched a movie called Jai Santoshi Ma (loosely translated 'Hail to the mother of satisfaction') in 1975 |
| *satī* | immolation of oneself in husband's funeral pyre |
| *sattvaguṇa* | quality of moral goodness |
| Śivarātri | 'night of Śiva'; Śaiva feast celebrated by the Hindu community of all castes either on the month of Māgha or Phālguna |
| Sīmantonnayana | ritual (*saṃskāra*) of parting the hair of pregnant woman to secure her from evil spirits |
| *sindūra* | vermilion drawn by married women on their hair parting as a sign of their marital status |
| Śītalā Mā | literally cold, cool, chilly; goddess mainly associated with diseases such as small-pox, chicken-pox and measles |

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| Smṛti | 'what has been remembered'; all authoritative Hindu writings that are not Śruti |
| Śruti | 'what has been heard'; the most sacred and completely authoritative part of Hindu scriptures. Śruti includes at least Vedas but also other texts depending on the affiliation of Hindu group |
| *strī ācāras* | community norms of married women; married women's rituals |
| *strīdharma* | women's law; duties of women recorded in Hindu law books |
| Śūdra | the fourth, lowest *varṇa* in the four-section division of Indian caste system; servant caste |
| *tamoguṇa* | the lowest quality of human nature marked by ignorance and vice |
| *ṭhākura* | god, deity, idol, lord, master; man deserving respect |
| *ṭhākurabāṛi* | literally 'house of god'; small temple, shrine |
| *ṭhākuraghara* | room for divine idols, statues and articles needed for the worship |
| *ṭhākurasthāna* | literally 'place of deity/deities'; any site people believe is occupied by deity/deities; local shrine, temple, pilgrimage site |
| *tilak(a)* or *ṭikā* | mark usually drawn on person's forehead with vermilion (*kumkum*, dried and powdered turmeric or saffron), ash, clay or sandalwood paste. Each Hindu tradition use different shapes and materials to make the *tilaka* |
| *tīrtha* | both Sanskrit and Bengali term; holy place; place for pilgrimage; river, sea or lake containing holy water; sacred place where one can cross over to the shore of liberation |
| *tīrtha-yātrā* | pilgrimage |
| *upabāsa* | abstinence from food |
| *upacāra* | articles necessary for conducting ritual; religious service or ceremony |
| *upahāra* | present, offering |

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| *uposa* | abstinence from food; fasting, fast |
| *yajña* | Vedic sacrifice; religious sacrifice; oblation, burnt offering |
| *yantra* | instrument, machine; geometrical design actualizing deity in the ritual |
| *zenana* | inner dwellings of house in which women of the family are to live |

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Fieldwork diaries are recorded during the fieldwork in the years of 2002, 2003, 2004, and 2008. They are all in the possession of the author.

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The 8th of January, 2004. Interview of Pal in Ganti
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The 28th of January, 2004. Interview of Mila in Ganti
The 29th of January, 2004. Interview of Dua in Harijan Basti
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